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THE ILLUSION OF A GREEK NECESSITY: A DEVELOPMENTAL
STUDY OF SYLVIA PLATH

by



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A THESIS

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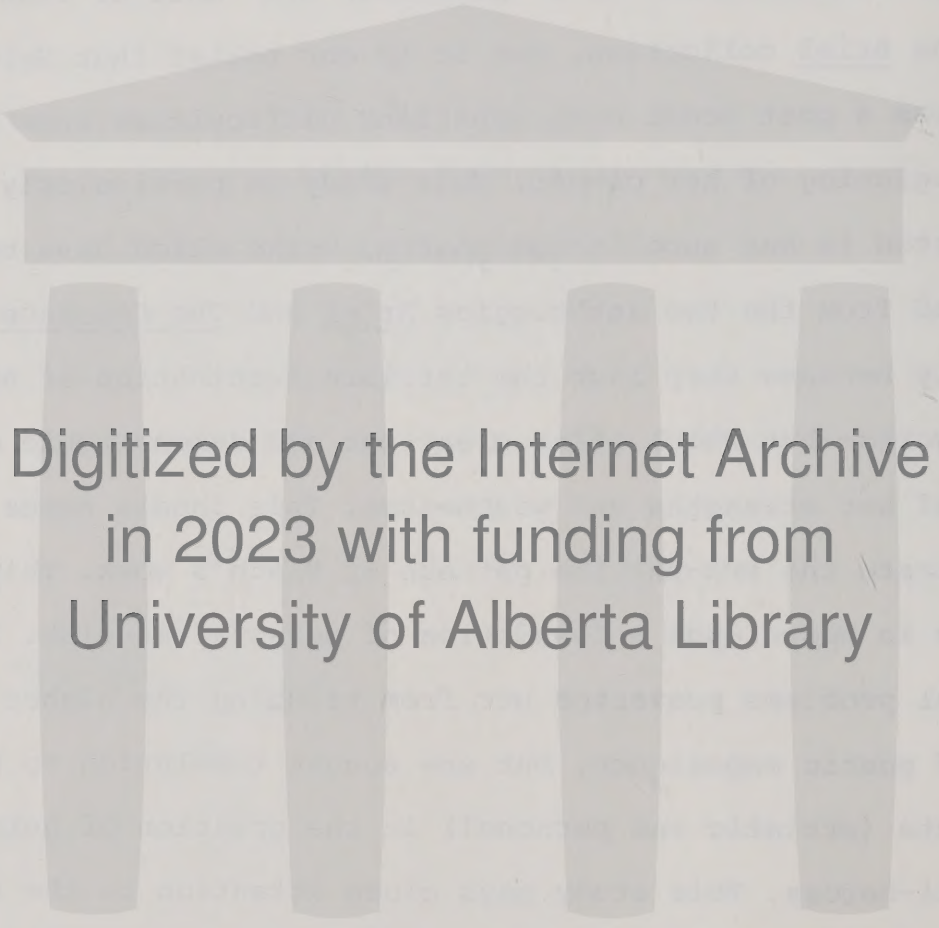
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to trace the development of the poet Sylvia Plath in order to elucidate upon what has been commonly regarded as her "suicidal poetry." Her reputation as a practitioner of a "murderous art" more or less rests upon the Ariel collection, but it is our belief that Sylvia Plath was a poet beset with appalling difficulties from the very beginning of her career. This study is particularly interested in her uncollected poetry, works which have been excluded from the two anthologies Ariel and The Colossus--possibly because they lack the terrible fascination of her later works--but which offer clear-cut and demonstrable evidence of her strengths and weaknesses. This thesis hopes to demonstrate the tri-partite pattern of Plath's work. This pattern is based upon a foundation of personal anguish. Her personal problems prevented her from reaching the higher levels of poetic experience, but she sought resolution to her conflicts (artistic and personal) in the creation of heroes and anti-heroes. This study pays close attention to the strong dramatic strain which runs through Plath's work, and defines her personal problems in terms of a conflict between reason and faith. Finally, this thesis seeks to give a sane and supportable assessment of the merit and relevance of Sylvia Plath's work.

Chapter one contains biographical material, and chapter two charts areas of technical and personal difficulties. Chapter three discusses her use of the confessional genre, while chapter four contains explications of poems



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selected for this study. The final chapters consist of twenty-eight uncollected poems by Plath; concluding remarks and reference material.

NOTES ON METHOD OF DOCUMENTATION

In order to avoid the excessive use of footnotes the following method of documentation has been adopted.

Works published in The Colossus and Ariel appear in the text in quotation marks and are documented with footnotes.

Works collected for this study are underlined and can be located on pages 63-97 of this thesis. These works are fully documented in the Select Bibliography, on pages 98-100.

Abbreviations are employed in the footnotes since the paucity of critical literature on the subject has necessitated frequent references to the same works.

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CHAPTER I

WHO IS SYLVIA?

The intensely private nature of Sylvia Plath's work coupled with the tragic circumstances of her death have prompted both reader and critic alike to ask the question: "Who is Sylvia?" This question, once asked is difficult to answer, for few poets in modern letters have proved so evasive. In the first place, it would appear, both from critical studies and from her poetry itself, that her suicide was a validation of her art. This is an extremist aesthetic to be sure, and using suicide as a critical standard frequently leads us far afield from purely literary concerns. We are ultimately led into the realms of psychology and psychiatry. Moreover, we will find that Sylvia Plath's work unhesitatingly leaps the barriers of genre, and we sometimes must apply dramatic, rather than poetic, criticisms to her art. She is, furthermore, a twentieth-century poet, yet her work runs the gamut from medieval to modern modes. Adding to these difficulties is the simple fact that Sylvia Plath's entire poetic structure rests upon a shaky foundation of personal anguish and conflict, and, for all the literary gloss and polish, we find that much of the attraction of her work rests in the interest aroused by the formidable but elusive presence of the poet herself.

Divergent as these strands may be, a careful study

of the entire canon of her poetry (collected and uncollected poems) reveals a discernable pattern. This thesis will be an attempt to categorize and explore this pattern, which may be roughly divided into three distinct elements. First, we must always be attentive to the interchange of her personal and artistic problems. As an examination of her earliest poetry will reveal, these were chronic with her, and as has been suggested previously, are a mainspring of her art. Secondly, we must carefully consider the strong dramatic strain which runs throughout her poetry. Finally, we must attempt to define those factors, both personal and aesthetic which prompted her constant retreat from that overwhelming experience which is the guiding force of all great art. Each of these points and their inter-relations will be examined in further detail in the following pages, but we would like to assert that the many disparate elements of Sylvia Plath's work are so closely and frantically intertwined that it is sometimes impossible to extricate them without upsetting their precarious balance. Thus we will find that in order to keep the critical horizons open we may often be dealing with more than one topic at the same time, and on several levels. This thesis is based on the premise that Sylvia Plath was constantly divided against herself, and if this is correct, we must accept diffuseness as a characteristic of her work and possibly of any criticism which attempts to give a total picture of her life and art. Since the biographical facts of her life are readily available and are important to a full appreciation of her work, we will commence with a brief biography.

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston; of a German father and an Austrian mother. Warren, Sylvia's brother, was born three years later. Sylvia's earliest childhood was spent by the sea: "the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic,"¹ and her earliest impressions and experiences of the sea reverberate through her work; from the very early Dream With Clam Diggers to the later "Berck-Plage."

When she was eight, in 1940, her father died after a lingering illness. This event seems to have had little immediate effect on Sylvia, except that it precipitated a move inland to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where Sylvia, her brother and mother settled with Mrs. Plath's parents. Mrs. Plath took a full-time job but devoted her evenings to the children, helping them with their lessons and reading poetry to them. Once she read Arnold's "The Foresaken Merman" and by her own account, Sylvia "experienced" poetry for the first time:

I saw gooseflesh on my skin. I did not know what made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a whole new way of being happy.²

From then on she began to compose impromptu little pieces about "Birds, bees, spring, fall--all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn't have any experience to write about."³ Her first publication was in the Boston Sunday Herald. It was entitled "Poem," consisted of four lines and was signed: "Sylvia Plath (Age 8.1/2 years)." About the same time, she developed an interest in pen and ink drawings and soon sketches accompanied the poems.

Her pre-adolescent years were uneventful. She was a good student, attended summer camp, joined the Unitarian young people's group and was invited to attend Mrs. Ferguson's elite dancing "Assemblies."

At Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School, she did well academically and socially. During her high school years, writing became more important to her and her teachers, impressed by her obvious talents, encouraged her. In March, 1950, after forty-five rejected pieces, Seventeen accepted a short story.

In the fall of 1950, she entered Smith College on a scholarship. Determined to keep her award, she studied with a passion, seldom dating and devoting most of her spare time to writing. Although friends tried to persuade her to be more sociable, she had already decided that she was "different" and steeled herself to the life of a recluse.

Her sophomore year was a happier one. She earned high grades and was elected to several college positions. Seventeen was regularly accepting stories and poems, but she confided to a friend that for all of the "few little outward successes" she enjoyed, there were "acres of misgiving and self-doubt."⁴ This period was a crucial one in terms of her later emotional difficulties, for it was during this time that "the conflict between the life-styles of a poet/intellectual and that of a wife and mother became a central pre-occupation."⁵

In her junior year, she was awarded two Smith poetry

prizes, was elected to the Smith honorary society for the arts and also to Phi Beta Kappa. In August of that year (1955), as a successful competitor in the Madmoiselle College Fiction Contest, she went to New York as a guest editor for the magazine. Although at the time she enthusiastically described her stay there as an "almost unbelievable merry-go-round month,"⁶ this experience seems to have triggered the severe fits of depression which plagued her after her return to Smith and which culminated in a well-publicized suicide attempt and hospitalization. The Bell Jar, her only novel, chronicles this period.

After several months of treatment, her doctors decided that she was ready to return to college. The winter semester was her period of "reconstruction" and was almost entirely successful. By the spring of 1955, she was firmly established socially and her high grades reassured her that her intellectual and creative abilities had not been diminished by her breakdown. That summer, on a full scholarship to Harvard, she studied German. The following term she studied creative writing with Alfred Kazin, took a special studies course (for particularly talented students only) with Alfred Fisher, and worked on the topic of her honors paper, the double personality in Dostoyevski's novels. She published in Harper's after "at least fifty rejections."⁷

She graduated, summa cum laude, in June, 1955. Her prize money and royalties for the year totalled seven hundred and fifty dollars, in addition to a Fulbright Fellow-

ship for study at Cambridge University.

Although her first winter there was plagued by poor health and minor accidents, she was ecstatic about student life in England. Spring brought relief from the repeated attacks of 'flu and sinusitis. During this term, she wrote enthusiastic letters about her philosophy professor, a woman, whom she described as "my salvation" by demonstrating, to her immense relief, that a woman need not "sacrifice all claims to femininity and family to be a scholar."⁸

In February of 1956, at a party to celebrate a new student publication, Sylvia Plath met and was favourably impressed by the poet Ted Hughes. The initial attraction, she later admitted, was that he was "the only man I've ever met whom I could never boss."⁹ She and Hughes were married that year, on June 16, in London. They spent the summer in the Spanish fishing village of Benidorm on the Mediterranean. Encouraged by Hughes, her writing went well and by the end of the summer both poets had manuscripts ready for publication.

Her Fulbright had been renewed, so the winter of 1956-57 was spent back at Cambridge, with her studying and her husband teaching school. The winter was a difficult one --expenses were high; there was little money. She found housekeeping in England, with its antiquated appliances and poor services, a dreary task and longed to return to the comforts and conveniences of the United States.

In 1957, the couple came back to America, spent the summer at Cape Cod, then moved on to Northampton. That winter, she taught English at Smith, where she is remembered as being "one of the two or three finest instructors ever to appear in the English department at Smith College."¹⁰ Although she enjoyed teaching, it left little time for poetry. By the end of the year she had decided to give up academic life and to devote her time entirely to writing.

The year 1958-59 was spent in a small apartment in Boston with both poets concentrating solely on writing. Their income was supplemented by readings and tutoring. It was during this year that Sylvia Plath became acquainted with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck, whom she met while auditing Robert Lowell's poetry class at Boston University. Despite these new influences, there was not much poetry from this period. The winter was a disheartening one and she expressed alarm at what seemed to be the gradual waning of her talents. Her dejection was deepened by the repeated rejection of her manuscript.

In the spring of 1959, Ted Hughes received a Guggenheim award and, after spending the summer on a camping trip across the United States, the couple returned to England. Sylvia Plath was pregnant at the time and preoccupied with thoughts of the baby, which she planned to have by natural childbirth. She and her husband settled in London and on April 1, 1960, their first child, a girl, was born at home. The birth of the baby added impetus to her work. By the time

the baby was a year old, Plath was well into her novel, The Bell Jar. Her book of poems, The Colossus, had been accepted and was due to be published that year. That summer the family bought a country house in Devon. Sylvia Plath was again in poor health, and although she relished country life the demands of house and family left little time for writing. She was discouraged that her work was going slowly and wrote to a friend: "a couple of poems I like a year looks like a lot when they come out, but in fact are points of satisfaction separated by large vacancies."¹¹ Despite the dampening effects on her work she continued energetically to pursue home and community affairs. Her frustrations, though real, seemed minor and soluble with time and discipline.

On January 17, 1962 her second child, a son, was born. Again the event was followed by a burst of creative activity, but her emotional and physical resources had been exhausted by the pregnancy and by a series of minor ailments. She was reluctant to face the rigours of another winter in Devon. It is conceivable that there was marital difficulty as well, for a few days before Christmas (1962), she left Hughes and took the children with her to London. She rented a suite on a five year lease and set about organizing her life so that she would have more time to write. This was to prove the most creative period of her life. Poems poured out at the rate of two and three a day. She wrote with an energy that caused friends to fear for her; she was, as one recalls, an "inferno." In the middle of January, 1963, The Bell Jar

was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Although the book received good reviews, she was reticent about its success; she felt it was not an "adequate" work.

That winter in London proved to be one of the coldest of the century. Pipes froze, electrical and heating service was impaired, and inevitably she suffered from 'bouts of 'flu and sinusitis. Despite these annoyances, "she wrote with intensity, convinced that what she was writing could be said by no one else."¹² In one letter she stated: "I feel like a very efficient tool or weapon, used and in demand from moment to moment."¹³ She was under a doctor's care, and had taken the children to stay with friends. Sensing that she was under a severe strain, they had implored her to stay with them, but she refused and returned to her London apartment, where she committed suicide on February 11, 1963.

From these biographical facts it can be seen that there is really very little romance to Sylvia Plath's life and death. What does emerge is a portrait of a sensibility deeply affected by the exigencies of everyday living. We are forced to conclude that we are dealing with a neurotic individual, whose vulnerabilities ironically both fostered and repressed her vast and very genuine talents. The extent and nature of the neurotic facets of Sylvia Plath's work will be further discussed in the following chapters, but suffice it to say that since the external facts of her life do not seem to warrent either suicide or suicidal art, justification must

be carefully extracted from the poems themselves.

It would be useful here to point out that Sylvia Plath seems to have been strongly influenced by the literary trends of her times. Confessional poetry was the major influence, of course, and has been treated exhaustively by most of her critics. Her work also bears the imprint of modern (and Classical) theatre, a fact which has been largely ignored in studies of her work. There are numerous factors which have prompted me to explore the relevance of drama to her poetry. In the first place, England of the late fifties and early sixties was the scene of a renaissance in drama, highlighted by the emergence of the "kitchen sink school" which recorded everyday life and which spawned a legion of anti-heroes. We will find that the bulk of Sylvia Plath's work, either consciously or unconsciously, echoes the concerns of the dramatists of her decade by concentrating heavily on the frustrations and fancies of the ordinary person in ordinary circumstances. We will note too, that the creation of heroes and anti-heroes is a vital force in her art. Later in her life, she was to stumble upon the fact that her poems were more meaningful when read aloud, a minor but significant fact which suggests to this critic that the poems themselves demanded a dramatic presentation. We must not neglect her fervent espousal of the confessional mode which relies heavily on the dramatic monologue and finally, we must bear in mind that she borrowed extensively from Classical theatre in her search for a suitable persona.

Pursuing our case for the importance of drama in her work, we will here define drama in a most basic sense, that is, as a method of "portraying life or character by means of dialogue and action."¹⁴ We will find dialogue frequently employed throughout her works and will discover that many of her energies were directed towards finding an adequate role for her poetic voice. This observation gains credibility when we consider that her personal life constituted precisely the same search. It seems that the creation of characters was a means by which she tried to project, analyze and resolve her own inner conflicts. These conflicts punctuate the nihilism that flows through her poetry and I would suggest here, and explore in detail later, the idea that Sylvia Plath used dramatic techniques to insulate herself from her own self-destructive tendencies. My argument, briefly, is this: It would appear that Sylvia Plath's instincts drew her irrevocably in the direction of total poetic experience. Such experience is essential to great poetry, just as the "dark night of the soul" is necessary to mystical revelation. In both cases, poet and mystic endure a metaphoric death and resurrection as a means of bearing witness to a sacred but communicable truth. However, to a sensibility that is not sustained by faith in the nature and worth of such experience, the experience becomes an end in itself. Thus we have "death" without faith (or hope) in "resurrection," and this notion informs most of Sylvia Plath's work. In the face of this frightening proposition, we find that the poet herself

constantly resists total artistic experience and allows her *dramatis personae* (Daddy, Lady Lazarus, the "other") to participate in that ritual death or ego-loss which predicates great mystical and poetic utterance. This is undoubtedly why so much of her poetry leaves us vaguely dissatisfied: the poet's presence is spurious, and since the poet is not "really" involved in the poems, they stand merely as a facade of metaphor beyond which glimmers the "real," remote and inaccessible.

It is not surprising that poetry and drama, used to such insanely ego-centric ends, ultimately failed her. She was never in her life able to break through to the "real;" the real experience, the real character, the real action. As has been suggested above, the crisis of Sylvia Plath's life and death is primarily a spiritual one, and herein lies much of the true significance of her art. Her suicide may be interpreted in theological terms as the ultimate act in the quest for knowledge: for knowledge of reality and for knowledge of God, and however fashionable it may be to dispute the Christian ethic, we are nevertheless confronted with the spectre of the forbidden fruit of Eden, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. To "know God" is a contradiction in terms--we can only "know" Him blindly, through faith. To expect more is to court destruction.

CHAPTER II

I WOULD BE CHASTE

Sylvia Plath's serious publishing career spanned only ten years, from 1953 to 1963. During this time she experimented freely with the many forms of English poetry which her education and intelligence placed at her disposal. By the time of the Ariel poems, most of these forms had been forged into her own highly personal style. Her reputation more or less stands on Ariel, the collection which includes "Daddy," "Death & Co." and "Lady Lazarus." The popular myth (given currency by Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, among others) is that these poems are the product of a sudden and inexplicable surge of previously-hidden talents. However, when one carefully examines the whole of Plath's work with the proper scholarly detachment, her last poems come closer to representing the end result of a long and well-considered search for the fullest expression of her gifts. One cannot deny that of her two volumes of poetry Ariel is the more persuasive, but scrupulous research is now required in order to dispel the aura of mystery which surrounds her later poems.

Finding a sane and supportable critical stand is possibly one of the most difficult problems for the serious student of her work. External factors render the task a tricky one, and internal factors such as Plath's reversals, evasions and retractions complicate it even further. As her popularity

increases, so does the need for thorough research into the complexities and relevance of her work. This thesis will be particularly attentive to the uncollected poems, since it is my belief that they will prove helpful in tracing her development. Also, these poems are more accessible to sane assessment since they have been relatively untouched by the critical bravura which surrounds the Ariel poems. All of the poems selected for this study have been published exclusive of The Colossus and Ariel. Although many of these uncollected poems are totally successful by any standards, it is virtually impossible to judge them independently of the Ariel poems, which are the recognized measure of her work. Consequently, frequent references to the Ariel poems cannot be avoided.

If finding a critical stand is a difficulty in dealing with Sylvia Plath, finding a critical language is equally problematical. We find ourselves irresistibly drawn towards the jargon of psychoanalysis, or towards the clichés of Freudian psychology. This holds true for much of modern literature in general, but it becomes all the more evident when dealing with a poet who appears to be firmly committed to neurosis as a basis of her art. To further complicate the issue, we find that Sylvia Plath frequently uses the best of the English literary tradition for the worst possible ends, or vice versa: for instance, the characteristic harmony of neo-Classicism is sometimes used as a vehicle for paradox (as in Wreath For A Bridal and Epitaph For Fire And Flower). The meaningful dialogue of drama is frequently re-

duced to ranting (as in "Medusa") and the guiding principle of Scholasticism, elucidation, is often used as a rationale for excessiveness (as in "Flute Notes From a Reedy Pond"). To sort out this conundrum, it is necessary to be most selective of the critical epithets we apply to her and to be more than cautious when it comes to most of the standard critical catch-words.

For example, some critics have commented on the "Gothic" flavour of her work, but I would submit that "Scholastic" is a more explicit and more appropriate term. Erwin Panofsky, in his study, Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism, provides us with definitions which prove useful in analyzing Sylvia Plath's early works (such as Dream With Clam Diggers), and observations which prove invaluable to a study of her work as a whole. According to Panofsky, the two controlling principles of Scholasticism are: first, clarification and second, "the acceptance and ultimate reconciliation of contradictory possibilities."¹

Concerning the first principle, clarification, Panofsky states:

. . . the Scholastic mind demanded a maximum of explicitness. It accepted and insisted upon a gratuitous clarification of function through form just as it accepted and insisted upon a gratuitous clarification of thought through language.²

Unfortunately, stylistically,

. . . this principle resulted not only in the explicit unfolding of what, though necessary, might have been allowed to remain implicit, but also occasionally, in the introduction of what was not necessary at all, or in the neglect of a natural order of presentation in favour of an artificial symmetry.³

It is in this latter sense that Sylvia Plath's Scholasticism foundered. Language, instead of contributing to that clarity of thought so necessary for the style, frequently is conducive only to an "artificial symmetry." This is evident in a poem such as "Flute Notes From A Reedy Pond":

Now coldness comes sifting down, layer after layer,
To our bower at the lily root.
Overhead the old umbrellas of summer
Wither like pithless hands.⁴

Although the metaphor (flowers as "old umbrellas of summer") technically ends with the word "wither," she feels obliged to tack on the simile: "like pithless hands." The final image is not functional and contributes little to the elucidation of the poet's thought process. This problem of over-embellishment was endemic to her, but her later image clusters did achieve more unity for the simple reason that she was later to give full vent to her genius for the second aspect of Scholasticism, namely the reconciliation of opposites. Typically, she was not satisfied to follow the dictums as traditionally laid down and, as A. Alvarez in his article "Sylvia Plath" suggests, she adopted a method of letting "image breed image until, in some curious way, they also breed statements, conclusions."⁵ This is evident in a poem such as "Medusa":

I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless,
Overexposed, like an X-ray.
Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican.
 I am sick to death of hot salt.
 Green as eunnuuchs, your wishes
 Hiss at my sins.
 Off, off eely tentacle!

There is nothing between us.⁶

The images shuttle between sacred and profane love ("Communion wafer/Blubbery Mary"); redemption and damnation ("Vatican"/"hot salt"); impotence and gross sexuality ("eunnuuchs"/"eely tentacle") and the denouement of the conflict is swift and final: "There is nothing between us." As Alvarez rightly observes:

. . . the movement is complicated. Often in these last poems it seems unnecessarily so. The images come so easily to her that sometimes they confuse each other until the poems choke in the obscurity of their own inventiveness.

Alvarez here may be echoing Panofsky's criticism of the Scholastic mental habit of "clarification for clarification's sake." The images seem to demand that the reader "know," empirically (from the evidence presented by the poet) that the experience in question is terrifying and unmanageable. This technique does not allow the reader any truly empathetic or imaginative participation in the poem. Thus the notion of "clarification" defeats its own purpose, we are allowed to "know" only what the poet wants us to know. Although Sylvia Plath eventually abandoned the scholastic mode, we will find that this habit remained with her throughout her career. (At this point we must re-iterate the dangers of attempting to adhere too rigidly to standard critical jargon when dealing with this poet; for although we can argue con-

vincingly that much of her work is full-blown Scholasticism, we could say that much of the same work is Baroque, and find that this position is equally defensible!)

We will now attempt to explore further those aspects of Scholasticism which are particularly relevant to Plath. Aside from the above-mentioned stylistic factors, it is a demonstrable fact that the basic premises of Scholasticism are pertinent to a full understanding of her work. The most important of these premises is that Scholasticism is based on faith, not reason:

'Sacred doctrine,' says Thomas Aquinas, 'makes use of human reason, not to prove faith but to make clear (manifestare) whatever else is set forth in this doctrine.' This means that human reason can never hope to furnish direct proof of such articles of faith as the tri-personal structure of the trinity [etc.] but that it can, and does, elucidate or clarify these articles.⁹

Implicit in this kind of faith (and in Scholasticism) is a capitulation to the possibility of a higher logic, and as has been suggested earlier, Sylvia Plath was incapable of such a "leap of faith." Witness the clear-cut division between the mystical and rational world in the poem, "The Ghost's Leavetaking":

Enter the chilly no-man's land of about
Five o'clock in the morning, the no-colour void
Where the waking head rubbishes out the draggled lot
Of sulphurous dreamscapes and obscure lunar conundrums
Which seemed, when dreamed, to mean so profoundly much,
Gets ready to face the ready-made creation
Of chairs and bureaus and sleep-twisted sheets.
This is the kingdom of the fading apparition,
The oracular ghost who dwindles on pin legs
To a knot of laundry, with a classic bunch of sheets

Upraised, as a hand, emblematic of farewell.
At this joint between two worlds and two entirely
Incompatible modes of time, the raw material
 Of our meat-and-potato thoughts assumes the nimbus
 Of ambrosial revelation. And so departs.¹⁰

(Italics mine. IF)

There are few constants in Sylvia Plath's work, but nominalism, "the doctrine that there are no universal essences in reality"¹¹ is one such constant; and despite all her frantic strivings for mystical experience, the chasm between faith and reason was never bridged.

If the style and theology of Scholasticism proved incompatible with Plath's taste and talents, we must consider the absence of drama as a further factor in her dismissal of the mode. Charles Newman in his article "Candor is the only Wile," makes this comment:

She sensed . . . that the Gothic was simply an importunate regurgitation of the classical mode, and a nostalgia particularly crippling to a female narrator. Within the gothic or classical traditions, one could be merely a 'heroine.' A poem might possibly be both oracular and feminist, but it was a personal medium or nothing.¹²

Newman's comments alert us to Sylvia Plath's disenchantment with a traditional form which failed to satisfy her requirements for a feminist, dramatic (and pragmatic) poetic.

Her gradual weaning from the "Gothic" (in Newman's sense) may be traced by observing her increasing dissatisfaction with its "crippling" role of passive female. Three poems, "The Beekeeper's Daughter" (1958-59), Electra on Azalea Path (1960), and "Daddy" (1963) will serve to illustrate this. In each of these poems, she examines her feelings

towards the death of her father and it is the shifts in perspective regarding this subject which offers an insight into her poetic agitation. "Beekeeper's Daughter" handles the father's death with a chilling, but tender remorse. The persona yearns for total identification with the dead father:

Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg
Under the coronal of sugar roses

The queen bee marries the winter of your year.¹³

In Electra on Azalea Path (p. 73) the persona assumes the fully-rounded and more active role of Electra:

It was my love that did us both to death.

As the persona of Electra gains dimension and stature, a sense of unassuaged guilt begins to insinuate itself into the work:

O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter,
friend.

In "Daddy" the persona springs fully-armed from the head of Zeus, one might say, and assumes a tone which is vengeful, guiltless, and unanswerable:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two --
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years if you want to know.
Daddy you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never like you.
They are dancing and stamping on you,
Daddy, daddy you bastard, I'm through.¹⁴

In so soundly repudiating the role of heorine, she was then faced with the task of finding a new role. Charles Newman cautions us:

We must constantly be attuned to the shifts in personae. . . for this movement is the dynamic principle of her art. It is fairer to both biographical fact and

the measure of her poetry to see these shifts in role as a poet's search for the most authoritative voice possible.¹⁵

Newman may be correct in this observation, but we must add that this search for an "authoritative voice" frequently defeated the larger purposes of her poetry, as these "shifts in role" were most frequently than not desperate attempts to heal her deep spiritual conflicts rather than to solve pressing artistic problems.

Several alternatives to the role of heroine were open to her. She could assume the voice of the militant feminist, or she could fashion a male mask, but she is neither militant nor masculine. In The Fearful (p. 87) she rejects both:

This man makes a pseudonym
And crawls behind it like a worm.

This woman on the telephone
Says she is a man, not a woman.

The mask increases, eats the worm
Stripes for mouth and eyes and nose,

The voice of the woman hollows--
More and more like a dead one,

Worms in the glottal stops.

Having pronounced herself both neuter and dead, she then proceeds to inform us in The Jailor (p. 96): "I am myself" but the assertion has a hollow ring, for underscoring all her work is her desperate fear that "herself" is really "nothing." We may now begin to perceive the frenzy with which she sought to fashion a role (in other words, a "real" person) by which she could calm her awesome doubts as to her own reality. She

did dismiss the role of heroine, but her ego simply could not survive without the protection and reassurance of such a role. Since her dramatic talents were not yet developed enough to enable her to fashion her own heroine, she simply switched from a Gothic to a Classical role, hoping to find a suitable persona among the great Classical heroines such as Electra, Clytemnestra and Cassandra.

In seeking a role from Classical theatre, Sylvia Plath tended to ignore the fact that there can be no drama without dialogue and valiantly attempted to fashion the Classical figures in her own distorted image. This process may be observed by again examining one of the dominant themes of her work, the father-motif. In Electra on Azalea Path she states:

My mother said: you died like any man.
How shall I age into that state of mind?

But for Sylvia Plath, it is not enough that her "hero" should "die like any man," for as J. R. Choron informs us in Death and Western Thought: "The exponents of the heroic ideal regard death as the climax and completion of life, the last and most searching ordeal to which a man is subjected and the true test of his worth."¹⁶ Thus, to add "worth" to the death of her hero (and by extension, herself) she must (in Electra On Azalea Path), "borrow the stilts of an old tragedy" that is, assume an heroic identity. She tries Electra, but when the notion of guilt becomes too burdensome, Electra swiftly becomes Clytemnestra. In Purdah (pp. 74-75) she asserts:

I shall unloose -
From the small jewelled
Doll he guards like a heart -

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.

Regardless, however, of how hard she may try, she cannot tailor these roles to her purpose, for in the absence of dialogue, the voices of Clytemnestra and of Electra "melt to a shriek," and we are left with histrionics, not drama. This breakdown of drama has more serious implications. As we have stated previously, the persona was the defense mechanism against her own nihilism. As persona after persona crumbles, she fights a losing battle against the rising pressures to prove her "worth" (indeed, her very existence!) by the "last and most searching ordeal."

Mythopoeia, the making of myth, predominates in much of Sylvia Plath's later poetry. Newman, in "Candor is the only wile," suggests that she ultimately becomes the "myth of herself,"¹⁷ that is, gradually makes her own voice her sole medium, rather than entrusting the task to a persona. Considering her overwhelming egocentricity coupled with her obvious failure to find or fashion a suitable hero, Newman's suggestion seems viable and may be tested by examining the strong metamorphic strain which runs through her work. In I am vertical (p. 81) she tells us:

It is more natural to me lying down,
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally;
The trees may touch me for once, and the flowers
 have time for me.

But myth (in the Ovidian sense, at least) presupposes the annihilation of ego, the transmutation from one state of Being to another. Although the process may be eminently

desirable ("I shall be useful when I lie down finally"), Sylvia Plath does not find it "safe" and rejects it:

This is not death, it is something safer.
The wingy myths won't tug at us any more.¹⁸

Her response to the urges of myth is always attended by a fuzzy kind of morality, as though there were something implicitly "wrong" with total surrender to intense experience.

"Faun," printed in The Colossus, imbues such surrender with a vague obscenity:

Haunched like a faun, he hooded
From grove of moon-glint and fen-frost
Until all owls in the twigged forest
Flapped black to look and brood
On the call this man made.

No sound but a drunken coot
Lurching along river bank.
Stars hung water-sunk, so a rank
Of double star-eyes lit
Boughs where those owls sat.

An arena of yellow eyes
Watched the changing shape he cut,
Saw hoof harden from foot, saw sprout
Goat-horns. Marked how god rose
And galloped woodward in that guise.

While Fauns are traditionally obscene, the important fact here is that in the faltering quality of the language and line, and in the total lack of conviction in the crucial last stanza ("guise" suggesting that the transformation is just a trick, really) we find evidence of a strong resistance to experience that not kills but ravishes.

She strongly punctuates this resistance in a poem such as Wuthering Heights (p. 82) which gives the air of terrible finality to surrendering to intense experience:

There is no life higher than the grasstops
 Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind
 Pours out like destiny, bending
 Everything in one direction.
 I can feel it trying
 To funnel my heart away.
 If I pay the roots of the heather
 Too close attention, they will invite me
 To whiten my bones among them.

But since great experience is the precondition of great art,
 she must somehow justify her inability to acquiesce to the
 higher poetic experiences. She apologizes:

O God, I am not like you
 In your vacuous black,
 Stars stuck all over you, bright stupid confetti.
 Eternity bores me,
 I never wanted it.¹⁹

She becomes glib and impertinent:

And you Great Stasis --
 What is so great in that!²⁰

and at one point gloats with obvious relish:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.²¹

But in spite of her evasions, her energies draw her irrevocably into the realm of the "Great Stasis," towards total poetic experience. Here again we must re-iterate the terrible duality of Sylvia Plath's work: a talent which could find its true measure only in an almost mystical submission to experience, as opposed to an ego, which could, under no circumstances, allow this to happen.

Poetry, it seems, was Sylvia Plath's alternative to the "wingy myths"--the realm of great experience. In true heroic fashion, the poem is the talisman which protects her ego from the terrors of annihilation. In order to assess her fairly as a poet, one must decide whether "art as defense" is a valid

aesthetic. I would suggest that this aesthetic is valid only at a certain point in the creative process, but that the true poet must ultimately transcend all divisiveness between the disparate elements of the creative act, elements such as ego and object, artist and subject. Should the poet's craft fail at the crucial "moment of fusion" we are left with what E. D. Blodgett calls "notes to poems," rather than poems themselves. I would further suggest that for Sylvia Plath, the universe was a space waiting to be filled: with poems, shrieks or babies. The compulsiveness with which she sought to fill the personal and cosmic void defeated many of the larger purposes of her poetry and we find that we could defensibly call many of her works "artifacts" rather than "poems." These poems-as-artifacts (or talismans) stand as a concrete bulwark between the poet and the higher verities and for this reason, we must frequently measure Sylvia Plath in terms of her potential rather than by her achievements. Her failures are, in some curious way, a measure of her talent, a lesser poet could not even have conceived of the problems she tackled. The purity of her emotion never matches Emily Dickinson, she lacked the seminal intellect of Joyce and she could not fashion nor dramatize her heroes in the manner of Yeats or Eliot, but the unremitting honesty of her work, coupled with the stunning inventiveness of her language testify to a genuine talent beset by staggering difficulties.

CHAPTER III

THE ANNUNCIATION

Perhaps the most salient feature of Sylvia Plath's mature verse is her intense concentration on personal and often extremely painful private experience. Although this increasing self-consciousness can be approached from a psychological view, some attention must be paid to the genre which shaped her final poems. Her espousal of the confessional mode was undoubtedly one of the major turning points in her career. Her admiration for the confessional poets was direct and unqualified:

I've been very excited by what I feel is a new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life-Studies. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much. These peculiar private and taboo subjects I feel have been explored in recent American poetry -- I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also about her experience as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsmanlike poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something quite new and exciting.¹

This "new breakthrough," as she calls it, seems to have given her the license so necessary to her particular kind of introspection. She was soon writing poems such as "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" and "Suicide Off Egg Rock" (both in The Colossus) in which, for the first time, Ted

Hughes tells us, "she tried deliberately to locate just where it was that hurt."²

If from this time on, Sylvia Plath's poems were to acquire a therapeutic value, it was at the expense of some of her earlier technical polish. For instance, she completely sacrifices that fine narrative skill which pervades such as poem as Dream With Clam Diggers (p. 63). In this poem, narrative leads to shock, but it is the shock of fully-drawn characters in a meaningful confrontation; not the mere shock of syntax, or of some novel way of viewing a perfectly ordinary situation:

Grim as gargoyles from years spent squatting
 at sea's border
 In wait amid snarled weed and wrack of wave
 To trap this wayward girl at her first move
 of love
 Now with stake and pitchfork they advance,
 flint eyes fixed on murder.

Although dealing with a dream, by nature a disordered experience, the narrative of the poem renders the experience coherent and possible. This is the making of poetry -- to make the impossible possible, to make order out of chaos, and is perfectly consistent with the first guiding principle of Scholasticism, the elucidation of the thought process. The confessional poet, however, in his celebration of chaotic experience bases his work on the assumption that heightened experience renders thought disordered. This assumption is directly contrary to the soothing pronouncement of Thomas Aquinas that "sense, too, is a kind of reason."³ Sylvia Plath could never have achieved the spiritual and mental

poise of Aquinas who testifies to a unity of thought and sense. Instead, she joyfully adopted the confessional technique of recording experience as it "is" or as it "seems to be" when viewed from various perspectives and which postulates sense as a stimulus to thought. This fragmentation of thought and sense leads us into the realm of chaos as opposed to the Thomistic "cosmos" or unity of thought and sense, and as has been stated earlier, tends to truncate the creative process. Recording experience as it "seems to be" is, as Ian Hamilton correctly asserts in his review of The Colossus, a "dangerous" technique for it encourages the assumption that "everyone knows what the universe is and that poetry is a way of telling lively fictions about it, of pretending that it is something else, something more interesting."⁴ Here perhaps we have unearthed the attractions of the Confessional mode: nothing had to be accepted on faith since everything is as it "appears to be" and Sylvia Plath, who was never able to fully grasp the "real," was given sanction to tell her "lively fictions."

The confessional mode did, however, add a certain respectability to those largely incidental experiences with which Sylvia Plath seemed to be most comfortable. Thus in "Point Shirley," which Ted Hughes informs us is "a deliberate exercise in Robert Lowell's early style,"⁵ we find little more at work than the perspicacious eye:

From Water Tower to the brick prison
 The shingle booms, bickering under
 The sea's collapse.
 Snowcakes break and welter. This year
 The gritted wave leaps
 The seawall and drops onto a bier
 Of quahog chips,
 Leaving a salty mash of ice to whiten
 In my grandmother's sand yard.⁶

Ian Hamilton's review of The Colossus trenchantly enumerates some of the most serious flaws of Plath's confessional poems:

. . . the experience is approached in terms of the appearances it might conceivably assume; it assumes a number of these, one by one, acting as an appetizing prelude to the appearance of the 'real.' This is a dangerous method . . . because it sets up no available scheme for discriminating between the various illusions; nor is there any way of limiting their number; the 'real' is known to the poet from the beginning and the spirit with which it is held from the reader is the spirit of fund and games; the strategy can easily come to seem like a way of using up powers of invention for which no more serious function can, meantime, be found.⁷

He goes on to elaborate upon that spirit of dalliance which seems to pervade most of her later confessional work:

The subjects -- and they are always at the bottom, the perennial important ones -- often seem bricked up with a tasteful hand, or glanced at from too many directions too quaintly; the assured, leisured accent that is so attractive in a tour de force like 'Mushrooms' seems to diminish the seriousness of say, 'The Ghost's Leavetaking,' a poem that is dense with disturbances of an important kind, all demanding to be followed through differently, more tentatively perhaps; certainly with less literary gusto.⁸

To these remarks we can only add that Sylvia Plath's "literary gusto" seems to be a technique which she repeatedly used to disguise the fact that her poetic experience was seldom at the highest, or purest, order.

What Plath stood to gain from the confessional mode was a singular voice. The nature of the confessional form is

that she could now afford to drop the persona -- the confessional form revolves around naked ego -- and to concentrate on recording her inner experience, however "shameful" or incidental. It is significant that a poem dating from this period, On the Decline of Oracles (p. 69) soundly denounces the visionary nature of poetry:

So much

Is vision good for; like a persistent stitch
In the side, it nags, is tedious.

Her muse will give her only "Tomorrow's gossip and doldrums." Therefore, she is spared both painful poetic experience and the responsibilities of "revelation."

With her adoption of the confessional mode comes a complete reassessment of the nature of the poetic vision and inspiration. One of the most tedious aspects of the confessional genre is its insistent relegation of transcendental experience to a purely psychological dimension: vision must always be explained away. (As in "The Ghost's Leavetaking," where the appearance of the ghost is attributed to indigestion; to "the raw material/Of our meat-and-potato thoughts" . . .) Where the transcendental poet (the poet of faith) strives to give credence to a reality beyond himself, the confessional poet (the poet of reason or the rational) seeks reality in his interior, personal experience. The credibility of the visionary poet comes from his assurance that his experience is "real" in an important sense, namely in the sense of revelation; whereas the confessional poet must always have a reason for his inspiration, even if that reason

is as empirical as "a persistent stitch in the side." More frequently, though, the confessional's inspiration issues from a heightened emotional and often somewhat neurotic state. The experiences arising from such a condition are constantly "deflected" (to use Sylvia Plath's own word) into something else; for it is a rudiment of confessional poetry that some experience is simply too painful to be handled. Gradually we are uncovering some of the most intricate mechanisms of Plath's poetic: where total poetic experience becomes too painful or frightening for her to handle, she may with impunity, retreat behind her barricade of metaphor and bombast. Thus, the "ghost" of "The Ghost's Leavetaking" is deflected into a dream figure. In other words, the ghost isn't really a ghost, but a metaphor for a nightmare (caused by indigestion) and the most meaningful communication we receive from the poem is the poet's own lack of conviction that the event which she is portraying is "real" in a relevant sense.

It appears that with Plath, one must always distinguish between experience for its own sake and experience as material for metaphor. That is to say, a distinction must be made between ghosts as ghosts (which is a matter of faith) and ghosts as figures of speech (which is a matter of reason). The sheer abundance of imagery should be enough to demonstrate that Sylvia Plath inevitably deferred to the imperatives of reason, but the conflict between reason and faith was a perennial one with her and her strivings for faith are a

strong undercurrent, even in her most reasonable moments. The effect of this particular conflict is that many of her metaphors are fragmented and inappropriate to the dimensions of her subjects and we are faced with a complicated movement consisting of an ambition towards, yet a constant retreat from, heightened experience.

Since this conflict results in what I have called "inappropriate metaphor," it will be necessary to define what I mean by that term. When metaphor is used correctly, it adds dimension. A familiar object is endowed with a meaning beyond itself. An inappropriate metaphor may add perspective or novelty, but it never succeeds in elevating or transcending the familiar. The appropriate metaphor moves from the specific to the general; from the general to the cosmic. This movement of course presupposes the existence of universals (in the metaphysical sense, as: "any metaphysical being which preserves or convinces an identity of nature through a series of changes or as embodying different relations . . ."⁹) and it is confidence in this presupposition which provides the appropriate metaphor with its genuine expansiveness. Once this confidence is shaken, however or should it be totally lacking, the metaphor literally has nowhere to go and, once it loses its mobility, it becomes inappropriate. This point may be illustrated by examining an Ariel poem, "Balloons":

Since Christmas they have lived with us,
 Guileless and clear,
 Oval soul animals,
 Taking up half the space,
 Moving and rubbing on the silk

Invisible air drifts,
 Giving a shriek and pop
 When attacked, then scooting to rest, barely
 Yellow cathead, blue fish-- /trembling.
 Such queer moons we live with

Instead of dead furniture!
 Straw mats, white walls
 And these travelling
 Globes of thin air, red, green,
 Delighting

The heart like wishes or free
 Peacocks blessing
 Old ground with a feather
 Beaten in starry metals.
 Your small

Brother is making
 His balloon squeak like a cat.
 Seeming to see
 A funny pink world he might eat on the other side
 He bites, /of it,

Then sits
 Back, fat jug
 Contemplating a world clear as water.
 A red
 Shred in his little fist.

The poem is not entirely without merit, but without any clear-cut direction, or more importantly, without any conviction that there is such direction, the metaphors ("oval soul animals," "blue fish" etc.) wander through the poem as aimlessly as the balloons themselves.

Sylvia Plath's more successful metaphors issue from the confrontation of her real and imagined worlds. Her technique is to fuse her two worlds into a third, one which strongly evokes the world of surrealist painting as described by John Canaday in Mainstreams of Modern Art:

Surrealism is based on the idea of shock through paradox, the idea of giving such a jolt to surface consciousness that it is dislocated to reveal the hidden mysteries that affect it. In surrealism these mysteries are usually morbid. Its immediate parallel outside the field of art is psychoanalysis which probes the darkness of the pathological spirit to discover rational explanations for irrational conduct. There is a terrible rationality to surrealism, the rationality of nightmare. In the world of the dream and the world of insanity, the most fantastic action is rational to the dreamer or lunatic because it is the end result of previous experience that dictates it. These previous experiences may be warped and out of kilter; all the same, they are present, and they demand the fantastic dream or the lunatic behaviour as their logical expression. Surrealism investigates this terrible world, this modern witches' dream-book where everything is vividly real, yet where nothing seems to be. The basic paradox of surrealist painting [and poetry] is that every detail of every explicitly represented image is undeniably there. It undeniably exists -- yet at the same time it cannot exist because it is outside the realm of possibility. Surrealism takes us into a world where the impossible and the undeniable are one and the same thing and naturally it bothers us. It is intended to do so.¹⁰

Even a cursory reading of the above passage should suggest surrealism's appeal to Sylvia Plath. Surrealism offers a method of discovering "rational explanations for irrational conduct," it explores a world where "everything is vividly real yet nothing seems to be" and it offers a clue to behaviour which is "the end result of previous experience." In these three areas at least, surrealism proved satisfying to Plath and her success with its techniques may be witnessed in the "terrible rationality" of the imagery of a work such as the Ariel poem "Fever 103°":

Love, love, the low smokes roll
 From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright
 One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.
 Such yellow sullen smokes
 Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devlish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.¹¹

The images, though seemingly unrelated, fuse together surely and swiftly to punctuate the theme of redemption. A. Alvarez, in his article "Sylvia Plath," charts the movement of the imagery:

The baby becomes the orchid, the spotted orchid the leopard, the beast of prey the adultress; by which time the fever has become a kind of atomic radiation (perhaps she was remembering the film Hiroshima Mon Amour, where adultery, radiation and expiation were also joined inextricably together). The idea of the individual and the world purged of sin is established, and the poem is free to move on to the realm of purification.¹²

Although Sylvia Plath was to fashion some astonishing poetry using surrealism, we must be alert to its limitations as a poetic method. Wallace Stevens says that:

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have been unconscious, not familiar things of which we have been conscious plus the imagination.¹³

This observation is particularly germane to Sylvia Plath for it is open to question whether she ever truly dignified her invention with discovery.

Plath's imagery is frequently given impetus by her strong dramatic sense, and the drama of the later poems was undoubtedly influenced by the confessional poets' use of the dramatic monologue:

. . . largely as a direct result of Robert Lowell's example, American poetry is moving towards an acceptance of the dramatic monologue as the predominant poetic mode. But it is a dramatic monologue in which the persona is not treated dramatically, as a mask, that is, in the manner of Browning's *Dramatis Personae*, but is projected lyrically, as in Whitman's *Song of Myself* or in Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. In other words, although the poem's style and method is unmistakably dramatic, the persona is naked ego involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences.¹⁴

The success of a work such as the Ariel poem "Lady Lazarus" suggests how mordant the confessional monologue can be. In this poem, the handling of the persona is remarkably assured. The character of Lady Lazarus is droll, elegant, vicious on occasion, but on the whole, totalling engaging. Imagery rounds out the fascinating character: "They had to call and call/ And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls." The persona holds centre stage, her audience is discreetly hushed, but very much in evidence. There is no dialogue, she requires none. Sylvia Plath on this rare occasion, seems totally comfortable with herself and with her material. Had she been able to sustain this ease, the monologue may have proved to be her salvation. But when the dramatic monologue fails her, and it frequently does, we find that:

. . . we are presented with the dramatic creation of the result of a breakdown in relations, rather than with the actual cause and effect. Poetry is not created until those bitternesses are 'caused' in the poem sufficiently enough to seem justifiable and inevitable.¹⁵

Although Sylvia Plath did more for confessional poetry than it did for her, it did give her the license to evaluate those subjects which were a chronic source of trouble with her. It introduces her to surrealism and would have undoubtedly given her the singular voice she required. On the other hand, by sanctioning her preoccupation with incidentals and by fostering her empiricism, confessional poetry frustrated her impetus towards higher and more meaningful experience. In addition to the personal and artistic difficulties which plagued her, a deeper and broader conflict reverberates through her work, namely, the conflict between reason and faith. The implications of this particular conflict far over-reach the avowed concerns of confessional poetry and for this reason, we suggest that she is by far the most significant of the confessional poets.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLOOD-JET IS POETRY

"The blood-jet is poetry/There is no stopping it."¹ Sylvia Plath's own words are the best description of the nature of that compulsiveness which constantly superceded the limits of her craft and discipline. This problem was always with her, but it is comparatively unobtrusive in many of her uncollected poems. Indeed, it seems that these poems have not received the attention they deserve because they lack the sensational virtuosity of those poems published in The Colossus and Ariel. Since many of the uncollected poems are meritorious in their own right, they may prove useful in clarifying some of the genuinely puzzling aspects of her work.

Since this is a developmental study, the works will be examined in chronological order. Also, it should be pointed out that some editorial discrimination has been exercised; the works represented here have been selected in the hope of tracing the growth of the poet; and for this reason, poems thought superfluous to this intention have been excluded.

Dream With Clam Diggers (p. 63) dates from her student days at Cambridge and was published in 1957. This poem is included here because it is at once evidence of Sylvia

Plath's early handling of the Scholastic form and an illustration of the sense of drama which permeates her work. Although the poem deals with a dream experience, the simplicity of style and language renders the experience coherent. With Scholastic explicitness, the work deals with a specific dream: "This dream" and a specific persona: "this roamer." The poem is constructed along strongly narrative lines and it is this kind of discipline that keeps the poem under fine, firm control. A vague, Wordsworthian quality informs the mise-en-scène of the poem: the poet, in a dream, recreates her childhood landscape. In counterpoint to this idyllic setting (complete with guardian angels) is the sense of the sinister which is inherent in the "soundless gulls," the "silent children," culminating in the eerie vision of the clam-diggers. The startling balance of attendant angels and gargoyles demonstrates her skill of reconciling "apparent opposites" (Panofsky's second principle of Scholasticism) and serves to punctuate the poem's chilling irony. The power of the irony in this poem rests in the negation of love as a positive and uniting force, and idea which is strongly suggested in the final stanza. This reversal is the product of the empiricist-nominalist viewpoint, which refuses to acknowledge the divine quality of higher human experience. There is a strong streak of primitivism in the poem, for the final vision issues from dark, random powers, for which the poet need assume little responsibility and which need not be justified in the poem. The persona (as heroine) is ultimately

guiltless in the face of the frightening reversal of love. It is the heroine's vulnerability to the situation which contributes to the drama of the poem. The dynamics of the ending are essentially melodramatic, the poem concludes on the full moment of terror and the reader is invited to draw his own conclusions about the confrontation of the heroine/poet with her spectres.

A simple narrative structure coupled with dramatic techniques suggests that Snowman on the Moor (pp. 64-65) was written at about this time, possibly shortly after her marriage to Ted Hughes. The poem is included here because it suggests that, even before her exposure to the confessional mode, she was experimenting with the dramatic monologue. The title remotely evokes an Othello/Desdemona situation which could have proved immensely exciting had it been pursued. She preferred, however, to keep her protagonists well-veiled. The poem is written in the third person, and the identification of the characters is vague enough that one could conceivably argue that the poem is a dialogue between the poet and her fretful other self. If this is so, we can see that even this early in her career she was attempting to reduce the conflicting elements of her experience into a common denominator: out of the conflict of the worlds of the two characters (husband and wife; body and soul) emerges the terrifying new domain of the Snowman-giant. However, the use of dialogue in stanza two and in stanza fourteen rings strongly of embellishment since the vagueness of characterization

does not really give her dramatis personae the authority to speak. Here we find she employs her favourite gambit of burying serious technical defects under a torrent of imagery. Thus, an innocuous snowman becomes: "a grisly thewed/Austere, corpse-white/giant." The abundance of imagery creates an over-poetic effect and a note of hysteria creeps into her affirmation of the significance of the experience. This hysteria remains with her, but as she grows more comfortable with both her hallucinated world and her craft, her ferment is sharpened. Snowman on the Moor is further marred by the present participle which ends the poem. Grammatically and poetically, "obeying" demands an object. The poet does not provide one and the reader is left in doubt as to exactly what has happened in the poem. Does the girl just "feel" better, or has she made some notable progress in the relationship with her adversary? The central issue of the poem, the spiritual and human conflicts, is neatly sidestepped. At the risk of sounding redundant, we must again point out that Plath's descent into the maelstrom of the unconscious was rarely tempered with a clear, positive vision of the higher realities.

On The Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad (p. 66) is included here because this poem contains some of the most lucid statements, currently available, of Sylvia Plath's aesthetic. Although her experience is often of the most frightening order, we find in this poem that she is committed, not to the exaltation of chaos, but to the mind's imposing "Its own order on what is." This is synonymous with Scholas-

tic "clarification" for inherent in the above quotation is the assumption that the poet's function is to elucidate upon what has already been "revealed" either through the senses or through cognition. The process of clarification is relegated to the "fantasy" of the "importunate head," in other words, the poetic imagination. The poetic imagination composes a "crisis" which denies the exterior calm of the natural world by exposing those irregular and inimical forces with supposedly lurk beneath its surface. These forces, once unleashed, could drive all creation "gibbering mad," and only the poet's vision could make them tractable. Couched in these terms, poetry becomes little more than a high-class game of see and tell, or an idle conjuration (or "clarification for clarification's sake") and Plath cannot accept this. Dryad is structured so as to create a dialectic between poetry as quackery and poetry as art. The first two stanzas lay down the rudiments of the craft while the next two stanzas constitute a search for the elixer which endows poetry with a life and necessity of its own. But the observed world is ever the same. Despite the tricks or the craft, a tree remains a tree. The final stanza suggests a resolution to the dilemna. In the same way that Yeats must patiently wait the birth of his "rough beast," inspiration, Sylvia Plath must "thieve" her poetry from the natural world and only hope that the hand of the arbitrary muse will bless it. The poet must concede that inspiration strikes like "terrible lightning;" it cannot be invoked by craft or cant. In Dryad we again find that dialo-

gue is superimposed upon the poem, rather than springing out of a fully-drawn dramatic situation. The poem revolves around a three-way conversation: the opening stanzas present the poet in dialogue with her imagination; and in the second, she discusses her problem with a "doctor." In the final stanza, the poet assumes the position of a detached observer and scrutinizes a "moon-eyed/Star-lucky sleight-of-hand man" (the Universal Poet) and from this relatively secure position, makes pronouncements upon the nature of the muse, the "jilting lady." The three roles of poet, patient and observer are handled somewhat superficially, but she displays a marked talent for keeping things "happening" in the poem. She never fully mastered the art of characterization, but in later poems, such as The Jailor (p. 96), dialogue and character are more fully dedicated to the inner urges of the poem itself.

The companion pieces Wreath for a Bridal (p. 67) and Epitaph For Fire and Flower (p. 68) were first published in 1957 and are included here because when taken together they compare and contrast two different views of love. The first poem constitutes a statement on physical love and the second contains reflections on poetic love. The poems are interesting because they catch Plath in a rare affirmative and wildly humorous mood, but also because they demonstrate the range of her acquaintance with English poetry. The first poem is a technical débâcle, falling somewhere between bad metaphysical and bad neo-classical in style and tone, but it is a wholehearted endorsement of love and marriage:

From this holy day on, all pollen blown
 Shall strew broadcast so rare a seed on wind
 That every breath, thus teeming, set the land
 Sprouting fruit, flowers, children most fair in
 To slay spawn of dragon's teeth: speaking this
 Let flesh be knit, and each step hence go famous.

The romance of the first poem is sharply re-evaluated in the second. Although the word "epitaph" of the second poem's title would seem to demand an elegiac style, the language and tone of Epitaph For Fire and Flower is conversational, almost chatty. It is possible that Sylvia Plath is here experimenting with new wine for old bottles, trying to hammer contemporary language into the unyielding walls of Classical poetic forms. The effect is cumbersome, but it does serve to underline her systematic devastation of the clichés of romantic love. The ephemeral nature of romantic love is a common enough theme, but in Epitaph it becomes an ambiguous one, lamenting the illusory nature of both love and the poetic image:

Seek no stoney camera eye to fix
 The passing dazzle of each face
 In black and white, or put on ice
 Mouth's instant flare for future looks;
 Stars shoot their petals, and suns run to seed,
 However you may sweat to hold such darling wrecks
 Hived like honey in your head.

A highly humorous description of the nature of love and poetry is achieved by the coupling of frantic sexuality ("Stars shoot their petals") and grandiose metaphor ("suns run to seed"). It is regrettable that Sylvia Plath did not have the insight to exploit that tremendous sense of the absurd which ripples beneath the surface of her sententious metaphor. Cos-

mic masturbation is ribaldry worthy of Chaucer but Plath, thinking no doubt that it was not proper, did not pursue the topic. It seems safe to state that these poems are two of her less noble failures. They are important to this study because they indicate the range and breadth of Sylvia Plath's familiarity with traditional diction. She may not have experimented with it extensively or intensively enough, but its use in these two poems should indicate that her later works were not the outpourings of an untutored talent.

On The Decline of Oracles (p. 69) is appropriately named. Its publication in September 1959, suggests that it dates from the time of Plath's first encounter with the confessional poets. The poem is important because it contains many of her grievances with the traditional functions of poetry and because it points out that, although she was nearly always guided by the dictates of reason, she was well aware of the incompatibility of reason and vision:

The peasants feast and multiply

And never need see what I see.
 In the Temple of Broken Stones, above
 A worn curtain, rears the white head
 Of a god or madman. Nobody knows
 Which or dares to ask. From him I have
 Tomorrow's gossip and doldrums. So much
 Is vision good for: Like a persistent stitch
 In the side: it nags, is tedious.

She then proceeds to vindicate her repudiation of tradition. The sybilline gaze of the poet is squandered on the contemporary scene: a cook in a restaurant, three visitors on a "shabby stair." The visitors may be the Magi, but there is no Christ-child; the visionary's eye has "gone dull." Like

the poet-persona of On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad, the speaker in Oracles coaxes inspiration from the real world, or from memory:

My father died, and when he died
 He willed his books and shell away;
 The books burned up, sea took the shell,
 But I, I keep the voices he
 Set in my ear, and in my eye
 The sight of those blue, unseen waves
 For which the ghost of Böcklin grieves.

The poem exudes an aura of dissatisfaction with modern society and implies that it is responsible for the "decline of oracles." This complaint echoes such works as Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Yeats' "The Tower." But where Eliot sought refuge in his anti-hero (Prufrock) and Yeats in his hero (Hanrahan), Sylvia Plath persistently seeks to raise her own voice, singular and undisguised against the tyrannies, real and imagined, which oppressed her. If there is a madness running through her work, it is this rash tendency to expose such a vulnerable ego to public view. As we have mentioned previously, she was never at ease with her persona until she began to experiment with the confessional monologue.

When Plath resorts to satire, as she does in Lesson In Vengeance (p. 72), two things emerge. In the first place, her use of satire further indicates her reluctance to compromise her voice with a persona; the satirist's eye is unbemused; his isolation springs from his greater insight into human nature (which he both pities and despises) and the savagery of his vision does not admit to the indulgences of lyri-

cism. (Although it certainly does admit to the indulgence of telling "fictions" about the universe!) It would seem then, that satire may have been a hospitable mode for Sylvia Plath. However, we must now consider a second factor. Whereas the target of satire is usually the "vices and follies" of mankind, Plath's use of this device inevitably turns on her. When she satirizes reason in poems such as Lesson In Vengeance and The Death of Mythmaking (p. 71), or lampoons the querulous female in the Ariel poem "The Applicant" she is invariably satirizing herself. Self-parody is, of course, a perfectly admissible aspect of satire, but with Sylvia Plath the preoccupation with self defeats any larger, moral purposes of satire. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, self-parody eventually turns to invective, but it would seem that any discussion of Sylvia Plath as a serious satirist would be irrelevant to this study.

Although she expended many of her early energies denouncing traditional forms, Plath was not equal to the task of creating a new one. She admits to this in Candles (p. 76), a poem dating from 1960. In the first stanza, the candles, "the last romantics" are a metaphor for the conventional modes of poetry. The second stanza, however, rejects this image. The traditional forms are too exclusive, something different is required, "daylight" perhaps, because it would "give everybody a fair hearing." The candle metaphor, the poem implies, simply does not rise to the occasion of modernity, but insists on dragging up a welter of "false, Edward-

dian sentiments." The candles evoke both a private and public history, neither of which is useful to the present of the future:

How shall I tell anything at all
To this infant still in a birth drowse?

This is a rhetorical question of course and, hence, unanswerable. In a rare quiet ending, the poet resigns her questions to light and shadow, to time. On a literal level, the poem deals with the relationship between mother and child. The word "tell" of the final line suggests, however, that the poem is dealing with the more complex problem of meaningful communication. In the acquiescence of the final line, the poet suggests that the art of communication is acquired only with time. The posthumously published Child (p. 77) concludes on much the same note; and in two other poems, Magi (p. 78) and For a Fatherless Son (p. 79), maternal concern is easily translated into a concern about her own work and about poetry in general.

Private Ground (p. 80), I am vertical (p. 81) and Wuthering Heights (p. 82) are included here because compared with the preceding four poems, they comprise an interesting comment on Plath's "death-wish" which has proved to be one of the greatest stumbling-blocks in studies of her works. The three poems mentioned above appeared within seven months of each other, between August 1961 and March 1962. They are characterised by a strong yearning for total unification with the natural world. This is a significant change from such poems as Wreath For a Bridal, in which the poet merely observes the natural world and comments on it from a detached

position. It would seem that the sentiments of motherhood, so delicately expressed in poems such as Child may have relaxed her into a willingness to explore the higher reaches of love. But here we must contend with Freud, who tells us that ". . . love threatens to obliterate the boundaries between object and ego."² Her stubborn resistance to the obliteration of ego has already been explored in earlier chapters, but we would like to add here that the despair of the later poems is not a death-wish, but the conflict between an inordinate self-love and the higher forms of motherly and mystical love. Mystic (p. 83), published posthumously, in August 1963, will serve to validate the above opinion. In this poem, we find that Plath is powerfully motivated in the direction of total annihilation through love:

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over --
Not a toe, not a finger -- and used,
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals?
What is the remedy?

But her Puritan sensibilities revolt: the experience is a sickness, there must be a "remedy." In later poems, the conflict between the different forms of love becomes more and more marked and the attendant notion of guilt pervades so strongly that we are forced eventually into the language of psychoanalysis to seek a "remedy" for her malady. R. D. Laing's, The Divided Self provides a useful explication:

It seems to be a general law [of mental illness] that at some point those very dangers most dreaded can them-

selves be encompassed to forestall their actual occurrence. Thus to forgoe one's autonomy becomes a means of secretly safeguarding it; to play possum, to feign death, becomes a means of preserving one's aliveness. To turn oneself into a stone becomes a way of not being turned into a stone by someone else. . . . Thoroughly to understand oneself (engulf oneself) is a defense against the risk involved in being sucked into the whirlpool of another person's way of comprehending oneself. To consume oneself by one's own love prevents the possibility of being consumed by another.³

Thus when Sylvia Plath so eagerly hastens to totally identify with her dead father, for example, it is not a suicide wish, but a "feigned death," the defense mechanism (which eventually failed) by which she sought to preserve her "aliveness." Laing's statement, of course, has its antecedent in the dying and reviving cycle outlined in chapter one of this study. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to compare and contrast aspects of the psychotic and the artistic (or mystical) experience, suffice it to say, the qualitative difference between the two seems to be a spiritual one. Without faith in, or hope of, redemption, the "night journey" or "descent into hell" becomes synonymous with madness. Where faith failed her, Plath's reason suggested to her that she submit her persona to the ordeals which she herself could not survive. We may now begin to comprehend why she was so ambivalent concerning the use of a persona: in some instinctive way she perceived that it was symptomatic of her mental illness; for an ego which required such thorough insulation was obviously unhealthy. She abandoned and brutalized the persona, but was always forced to return to it and when it finally did collapse under the strain of her guilt and

turmoil, it cost her her life.

It is almost inevitable that the poems from 1963 testify as much to the erosion of her psychic defenses as to her development as a poet. This fact possibly accounts for much of the fascination of these works. Hopefully, the preceding pages have thrown some light on what is commonly called the "suicidal" poetry of Ariel, and, as usual, we will find her uncollected works from this period helpful in shaping our final judgements. In October 1962 (eight months after her death) Encounter carried "Ten poems by Sylvia Plath." Of the ten, only five appear in Ariel.

The Swarm (p. 84) is included here because it is one of her most finely structured poems. It reveals a consistency and propriety of metaphor which is surprising in the light of all her previous technical difficulties. The accomplishment of the work rests in the rapidly shifting attitudes towards the central image, a swarm of bees. The poet skilfully runs the gamut of every emotion which such a phenomenon could induce: terror, disgust, pity, culminating in relief at the swarm's defeat. It is superfluous to point out that these are the ingredients of Aristotelean drama: catharsis through pity and terror. This poem is a rare work for Plath, and one of her best.

The Swarm is an exception among her later works for these are unanimously directed towards healing the breach in her divided loves. She is frequently underestimated because of her preoccupation with seemingly trivial concerns, but we

must remember that, towards the end of her life, at least, the trivial was of monumental importance. For example, in a work such as Childless Woman (p. 86) minor feminine frustrations are inextricably connected with major artistic concerns. When a woman's body is unproductive, failing to provide a love-object (a child), it becomes "ungodly." Similarly, the poetic sensibility which will not yield to the impulses of higher love becomes "spiderlike" -- that is, inhuman. The women-poet relationship is rounded out in the final, funereal images, by which Plath implies that feminine and poetic sterility are synonymous with a lack of love and, ultimately, with death. But if loving a child can open the soul to the redemptive powers of higher love, human love can also pose a threat to the tenuous self-love. Therefore, the child in The Fearful (p. 87) becomes menacing, a "Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty." Similarly, in Thalidomide (p. 88), motherly love is "unsafe," the child becomes an appalling "thing."

The sense of guilt which informs her later work is companion to her conflicting loves, and is the motive force behind her ardent desire for purification. The theme of expiation impinges heavily on a work such as Mary's Song (p. 89). In this poem, the pascal lamb becomes the "Sunday lamb." The cooking fire becomes the fire of purification, "Melting the tallow of heretics." The poet assumes the role of Jew, the "golden child the world will kill and eat." In other words, she becomes both sacrificer and sacrificed, Jew and Christ

combined. The poet's sense of personal guilt is projected onto an object of collective guilt, in this case, the Jews. This is a particularly resourceful choice, since the Jews are "guilty" of killing Christ and at the same time, "victims" of genocide. In assuming the persona of the persecuted (Christ and Jew), the poet presumably is able to ease her burden of personal guilt. The expiation is achieved through the killing of the ritual scapegoat (that is, the persona): poet, Christ, Jew. It would seem that in handling such an explosive subject as her own guilt, Sylvia Plath was prudent in choosing metaphors of collective guilt, such as the Jews, or the Japanese, for although the drama is still there, objects of collective guilt can always remain impersonal -- the "blame" can be shifted to humanity in general (everyone is "guilty" of the Jews, the Japanese) and can thus be handled in a more detached manner. In a poem such as "Daddy" however, there is no escape from the personal guilt. Poet and persona become fused, and when the persona buckles under the weight of her anxieties, it takes her with it.

Accompanying the theme of expiation are the attempts at full objectification of the "otherness," the second self. The progress of these efforts may be traced from the earliest poems such as On The Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad, in which the other self is identified with the creative imagination, to the confessional poems such as The Other (p. 95) in which otherness is recognized as a symptom of a split personality. Towards the end of Sylvia Plath's life, the other

emerges as an increasingly inimical force. In a poem such as Face Lift (p. 90), the poet seeks release from her troubling partner by literally cutting it away. She emerges from under the surgeon's knife whole and renewed -- "Mother to myself." Implicit in this poem is the concept of purification through ordeal. In the poem In Plaster (p. 91), the poet undergoes a kind of ritual pertification before coming to the conclusion that the power of the other is not "fatal." In Eavesdropper (pp. 93-94), the second self is more meddlesome than dangerous, but becomes a malign keeper in The Jailor (p. 96). This poem deals with the total failure of love, reducing it to terms of rape and torture. If we are correct in assuming that these last poems testify to the total engulfment of the persona by the poet's own guilt and anxieties, we are led to the conclusion that Sylvia Plath's "jailor" is no other but herself, and it is towards herself that the invective of the final poems is directed.

This chapter has concentrated on Plath's development as a poet. Parallel to this study, the psychological aspects of her work have been scrutinized. It is not really surprising that the latter concern generally commands as much attention as the former, for as we have seen, the two cannot be easily separated. Any final judgements on the poems seem predestined to formulate opinions on the psychology of the poet as well, and although Sylvia Plath's personality constantly demands attention, it defies definitive analysis. However, we will now attempt to draw our conclusions. In the first place, we

may now begin to perceive why so little in Plath's poetry satisfies our expectations for the "real." Because she was constantly striving to preserve her own personal reality, her aliveness, and since she had serious doubts about this, her poetry constitutes a search for a mercurial reality which constantly evaded her. Confessional poetry cultivated in her the habit of freezing the creative process at its most painful moments, with the result that the "real" was never fully perceived or communicated. Any attempts to portray the "real" proved gratuitous. Her personae are equally gratuitous. As we have tried to demonstrate, they were intolerable, yet necessary to her. She wanted to discard them, not to find an "authoritative" voice, but her own voice, but the personae clung to her like Lady Lazarus' "sticky pearls." Her imagery, as has been frequently suggested, was a facade behind which the real world waited patiently. The key to her tangled loves lies somewhere in the realm of psychiatry and, as critics, we can only observe the paradox of a self-love so excessive that it resisted the compelling urges of mysticism, yet so fragile that it was threatened by the natural expression of motherly love. Here we find artistic isolation of a particularly devastating kind: an isolation devoid of vision, faith and love.

We have asked the question "Who is Sylvia?" and probably we shall have to go on asking it, for although we have constructed a more or less total picture of her private hell, Sylvia Plath still remains a mystery.

CHAPTER V

STASIS IN DARKNESS: CONCLUDING REMARKS

"We have come so far, it is over."¹ Sylvia Plath wrote these words in the last week of her life. But the critic's work is far from over, for her involuted and tortured works still cry out for definitive analysis. There have been two tendencies in studies of her work: she is either lauded as a genius of the highest order, or dismissed as a freakish literary phenomenon of little enduring merit. Lately, the froth on this critical brew has settled somewhat and it is now possible to make judgements detached from assessments which have frequently been as hysterical as the poetry which occasioned them.

First, we must recapitulate the tenents of this thesis. We have suggested that Sylvia Plath, intellectually, emotionally and artistically, was constantly at odds with herself; and that the divisiveness of her personality virtually overpowered her artistry. To support this argument, we have paid considerable attention to the uncollected poems in an attempt to prove that these conflicts, so graphically expressed in Ariel, were perennial with her. Although, as we have pointed out, it is difficult to categorize neatly the poet or her works, we have attempted to demonstrate that there is a tri-partite pattern to her works, which functions roughly as a dialectic. The thesis of this dialectic is the

personal and artistic problems; its antithesis (in the sense of end result) is an inability to achieve total poetic experience. These two elements sought their synthesis in drama, by which she attempted to create whole, real characters through whom she could vicariously express and (hopefully) resolve her conflicts. We must hasten to add that this is a wholly theoretical approach to her work and is, in many ways, an oversimplification, as her work does not easily yield to systems or to logic.

We feel that this thesis has demonstrated that Sylvia Plath's work is a search for a personal identity. This is a cliché, of course, and as such cannot prove totally satisfying to highest scholarly standards, yet our studies here seem to indicate that all pronouncements on her work will ultimately prove clichéd in one way or another. The works provide abundant evidence that she was in no way assured or confident of her own "reality," and her most successful poems, such as "Lady Lazarus," are those in which she conforms to the standards of the best art and allows her personality to become submerged in the persona. But here we are confronted with the counter-movement, the violent rebellion against the compromise of her frail personal identity with the dictates of Art. Although some of her poems, "Ariel," "Death & Co." and "Words," to name three, are successful by any standards, the majority of her works are characterized by a steady retreat from the demands of greatness.

Underlying the personal and artistic difficulties is

a problem of vast implications: the gap between reason and faith. The trivia which occupies such an important place in her work seeks to deny the existence of this problem and here we must recognize Sylvia Plath's favourite tactic of detracting from truly important subjects by retreating behind a barricade of incidental language, and of evading crucial issues by thrusting her artistic difficulties onto the unobliging backs of her *dramatis personae*. This tendency leads us to level the charge of self-indulgence -- rather than meeting the demands of great art, she escaped into verbiage and dramatics which were so easy for her. The final conclusion of this thesis is that despite Sylvia Plath's genuine successes with the confessional monologue; despite the relevance of her spiritual turmoil and despite the vigour and ingenuity of her language, she must be considered a minor poet.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

- ¹Sylvia Plath, "Ocean 1212 W," The Listener, VLXX (1963), 312.
- ²Ibid., VLXX, 312.
- ³Plath in "Sylvia Plath" by A. Alvarez, Tri-Quarterly [hereafter cited as TQ], VII, (1966), 65.
- ⁴Plath in "Notes Towards a Biography," by Lois Ames, TQ, VII, (1966), 99.
- ⁵Ames, "Notes," TQ, VII, 99.
- ⁶Cited in Ames, "Notes," TQ, VII, 99.
- ⁷Ibid., VII, 101.
- ⁸Ibid., VII, 102.
- ⁹Ibid., VII, 102.
- ¹⁰Ames, "Notes," TQ, VII, 106.
- ¹¹Cited in Ames, "Notes," TQ, VII, 107.
- ¹²Ames, "Notes," TQ, VII, 107.
- ¹³Cited in Ames, "Notes," TQ, VII, 107.
- ¹⁴Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield, 1963), 250.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

- ¹Erwin Panofsky, Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism, 64.
- ²Ibid., 59-60.
- ³Ibid., 35.
- ⁴Plath, "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond," The Colossus, 84.
- ⁵Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," TQ, VII, 70.
- ⁶Plath, "Medusa," Ariel, 46.
- ⁷Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," TQ, VII, 70.

- ⁸Panofsky, 35.
- ⁹Cited in Panofsky, 29.
- ¹⁰Plath, "The Ghosts Leavetaking," The Colossus, 39.
- ¹¹Webster's Dictionary, 569.
- ¹²Charles Newman, "Candor is the only wile," TQ, VII, (1966), 61.
- ¹³Plath, "The Beekeeper's Daughter," The Colossus, 75.
- ¹⁴Plath, "Daddy," Ariel, 56.
- ¹⁵Newman, "Candor," TQ, VII, 61.
- ¹⁶J. Choron, Death and Western Thought, 14.
- ¹⁷Newman, "Candor," TQ, VII, 61.
- ¹⁸Plath, "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond," The Colossus, 85.
- ¹⁹Plath, "Years," Ariel, 73.
- ²⁰Ibid., 73.
- ²¹Plath, "The Munich Mannequins," Ariel, 74.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- ¹Plath, "Sylvia Plath," by Alvarez, TQ, VII, 69.
- ²Ted Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's poems," TQ, VII, (1966), 84.
- ³Panofsky, Gothic Architecture, 38.
- ⁴Ian Hamilton, Poetry, London Magazine, III, (1963), 54.
- ⁵Hughes, "Notes," TQ, VII, 84.
- ⁶Plath, "Point Shirley," The Colossus, 24.
- ⁷Hamilton, "Poetry," London Magazine, III, 54.
- ⁸Ibid., III, 54.
- ⁹Webster's Dictionary, 930.
- ¹⁰John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art, 96.

- ¹¹Plath, "Fever 103°," Ariel, 58.
- ¹²Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," TQ, VII, 70.
- ¹³Cited in J. Buttell, The Making of "Harmonium," 1962.
- ¹⁴A. R. Jones, "Necessity and Freedom," Critical Quarterly, VII, 14.
- ¹⁵Peter Dale, "O honey bees come build," Agenda: Special Issue: U. S. Poetry, IV, (1966), 49.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- ¹Plath, "Kindness," Ariel, 83.
- ²Cited in Newman, "Candor," TQ, VII, 49.
- ³R. D. Laing, The Divided Self, 51.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

- ¹Plath, "Edge," Ariel, 85.

CHAPTER VI

A FAIR HEARING: UNCOLLECTED POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

DREAM WITH CLAM-DIGGERS

This dream budded bright with leaves around the edges,
Its clear air winnowed by angels; she was come
Back to her early sea-town home
Scathed, stained after tedious pilgrimages.

Barefoot, she stood, in shock of that returning,
Beside a neighbor's house
With shingles burnished as glass,
Blinds lowered on that hot morning.

No change met her: garden terrace, all summer
Tanged by melting tar,
Sloped seaward to plunge in blue; fed by white fire,
The whole scene flared welcome to this roamer.

High against heaven, gulls went wheeling soundless
Over tidal-flats where three children played
Silent and shining on a green rock bedded in mud,
Their fabulous heyday endless.

With green rock gliding, a delicate schooner
Decked forth in cockle-shells,
They sailed till tide foamed round their ankles
And the fair ship sank, its crew knelled home for dinner.

Plucked back thus sudden to that far innocence,
She, in her shabby travel garb, began
Walking eager toward water, when there, one by one,
Clam-diggers rose up out of dark slime at her offense.

Grim as gargoyles from years spent squatting at sea's border
In wait amid snarled weed and wrack of wave
To trap this wayward girl at her first move of love,
Now with stake and pitchfork they advance, flint eyes fixed
on murder.

THE SNOWMAN ON THE MOOR

Stale-mated their armies stood, with tottering banners:
She flung from a room
Still ringing with bruit of insults and dishonors

And in fury left him
Glowering at the coal-fire: "Come find me"-her last taunt.
He did not come

But sat on, guarding his grim battlement.
By the doorstep
Her winter-beheaded daisies, marrowless, gaunt,

Warned her to keep
Indoors with politic goodwill, not haste
Into a landscape

Of stark wind-harrowed hills and weltering mist;
But from the house
She stalked intractable as a driven ghost

Across moor snows
Pocked by rook-claw and rabbit-track: she must yet win
Him to his knees-

Let him send police and hounds to bring her in.
Nursing her rage
Through bare whistling heather, over stiles of black stone,

To the world's white edge
She came, and called hell to subdue an unruly man
And join her siege.

It was no fire-blurting fork-tailed demon
Volcanoed hot
From marble snow-heap of moor to ride that woman

With spur and knout
Down from pride's size: instead, a grisly-thewed
Austere, corpse-white

Giant heaved into the distance, stone-hatcheted,
Sky-high, and snow
Floured his whirling beard, and at his tread

Ambushed birds by
Dozens dropped dead in the hedges: o she felt
No love in his eye,

Worse--saw dangling from that spike-studded belt
ladies' sheaved skulls:
Mournfully the dry tongues clacked their guilt:

"Our wit made fools
Of kings, unmanned kings' sons: our masteries
Amused court halls:

For that brag, we barnacle these iron thighs."
Throned in the thick
Of a blizzard, the giant roared up with his chattering tro-
/phies.

From brunt of axe-crack
She shied sideways: a white fizz! and the giant, pursuing,
Crumbled to smoke.

Humbled then, and crying,
The girl bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk
And mild obeying.

ON THE DIFFICULTY OF CONJURING UP A DRYAD

Ravening through the persistent bric-a-brac
 Of blunt pencils, rose-sprigged coffee cup,
 Postage stamps, stacked books' clamor and yawp,
 Neighborhood cockcrow--all nature's prodigal backtalk,
 The vaunting mind
 Snubs impromptu spiels of wind
 And wrestles to impose
 Its own order on what is.

"With my fantasy alone," brags the importunate head,
 Arrogant among rook-tongued spaces,
 Sheep greens, finned falls, "I shall compose a crisis
 To stun sky black out, drive gibbering mad
 Trout, cock, ram,
 That bulk so calm
 On my jealous stare,
 Self-sufficient as they are."

But no hocus-pocus of green angels
 Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye;
 "My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,
 And that damn scrupulous tree won't practise wiles
 To beguile sight:
 E.G., by cant of light
 Concoct a Daphne;
 My tree stays tree.

"However I wrench obstinate bark and trunk
 To my sweet will, no luminous shape
 Steps out radiant in limb, eye, lip,
 To hoodwink the honest earth which pointblank
 Spurns such fiction
 As nymphs; cold vision
 Will have no counterfeit
 Palmed off on it.

"No doubt now in dream-propriety fall some moon-eyed,
 Star-lucky sleight-of-hand man watches
 My jilting lady squander coin, gold leaf stock ditches,
 And the affluent air go studded with seed,
 While this beggared brain
 Hatches no fortune,
 But from leaf, from grass,
 Thieves what it has."

WREATH FOR A BRIDAL

What though green leaves only witness
Such pact as is made once only; what matter
That owl voice sole "yes," while cows utter
Low moos of approve; let sun surpliced in brightness
Stand stock still to laud these mated ones
Whose stark act all coming double luck joins.

Couched daylong in cloisters of stinging nettle
They lie, cut-grass assaulting each separate sense
With savor; coupled so, pure paragons of constance,
This pair seek single state from that dual battle.
Now speak some sacrament to parry scruple
For wedlock wrought within love's proper chapel.

Call here with flying colors all watchful birds
To people the twigged aisles; lead babel tongues
Of animals to choir: "Look what thresh of wings
Wiolds guard of honor over these!" Starred with words,
Let nightbless that luck-rooted mead of clover
Where, bedded like angels, two burn one fever.

From this holy day on, all pollen blown
Shall strew broadcast so rare a seed on wind
That every breath, thus teeming, set the land
Sprouting fruit, flowers, children most fair in legion
To slay spawn of dragon's teeth: speaking this promise,
Let flesh be knit, and each step hence go famous.

EPITAPH FOR FIRE AND FLOWER

You might as well string up
 This wave's green peak on wire
 To prevent fall, or anchor the fluent air
 In quartz, as crack your skull to keep
 These two most perishable lovers from the touch
 That will kindle angels' envy, scorch and drop
 Their fond hearts charred as any match.

Seek no stony camera-eye to fix
 The passing dazzle of each face
 In black and white, or put on ice
 Mouth's instant flare for future looks;
 Stars shoot their petals, and suns run to seed,
 However you may sweat to hold such darling wrecks
 Hived like honey in your head.

Now in the crux of their vows, hang your ear
 Still as a shell: hear what an age of glass
 These lovers prophesy to lock embrace
 Secure in museum diamond for the stare
 Of astounded generations; they wrestle
 To conquer cinder's kingdom in the stroke of an hour
 And hoard faith safe in a fossil.

But though they'd rivet sinews in rock
 And have every weathercock kiss hang fire
 As if to outflame a phoenix, the moment's spur
 Drives nimble blood too quick
 For a wish to tether: they ride nightlong
 In their heartbeats' blazing wake until red cock
 Plucks bare that comet's flowering.

Dawn snuffs out star's spent wick
 Even as love's dear fools cry evergreen,
 And a languor of wax congeals the vein
 No matter how fiercely lit; staunch contracts break
 And recoil in the altering light: the radiant limb
 Blows ash in each lover's eye; the ardent look
 Blackens flesh to bone and devours them.

ON THE DECLINE OF ORACLES

Inside a ruined temple the broken statue
of a god spoke a mysterious language.

Giorgio de Chirico

My father kept a speckled conch
By two bronze bookends of ships in sail,
And as I listened its cold teeth seethed
With voices of that ambiguous sea
Old Böcklin missed, who held a shell
To hear the sea he could not hear.
What the seashell spoke to his inner ear
He knew, but no peasants know.

My father died, and when he died
He willed his books and shell away;
The books burned up, sea took the shell,
But I, I keep the voices he
Set in my ear, and in my eye
The sight of those blue, unseen waves
For which the ghost of Böcklin grieves.
The peasants feast and multiply

And never need see what I see.
In the Temple of Broken Stones, above
A worn curtain, rears the white head
Of a god or madman. Nobody knows
Which, or dares ask. From him I have
Tomorrow's gossip and doldrums. So much
Is vision good for: like a persistent stitch
In the side, it nags, is tedious.

Straddling a stool in the third-floor window-
Booth of the Alexandra House
Over Petty Cury, I regard
With some fatigue the smoky rooms
Of the restaurant opposite; see impose
Itself on the cook at the steaming stove
A picture of what's going to happen. I've
To wait it out. It will come. It comes:

Three barely-known men are coming up
A stair: this veils both stove and cook.
One is pale, with orange hair;
Behind glasses the second's eyes are blurred;
The third walks leaning on a stick
And smiling. These trivial images
Invade the cloistral eye like pages
From a gross comic strip, and toward

The happening of this happening
The earth turns now. In half an hour

I shall go down the shabby stair and meet,
Coming up, those three. Worth
Less than present, past--this future.
Worthless such vision to eyes gone dull
That once descried Troy's towers fall,
Saw evil break out of the north.

THE DEATH OF MYTH-MAKING

Two virtues ride, by stallion, by nag,
 To grind our knives and scissors:
Lantern-jawed Reason, squat Common Sense,
One courting doctors of all sorts,
 One, housewives and shopkeepers.

The trees are lopped, the poodles trim,
 The laborer's nails pared level
Since those two civil servants set
Their whetstone to the blunted edge
 And minced the muddling devil

Whose owl-eyes in the scraggly wood
 Scared mothers to miscarry,
Drove the dogs to cringe and whine,
And turned the farmboy's temper wolfish,
 The housewife's, desultory.

A LESSON IN VENGEANCE

In the dour ages
Of drafty cells and draftier castles,
Of dragons breathing without the frame of fables,
Saint and king unfisted obstruction's knuckles
By no miracle or majestic means,

But by such abuses
As smack of spite and the overscrupulous
Twisting of thumbscrews: one soul tied in sinews,
One white horse drowned, and all the unconquered pinnacles
Of God's city and Babylon's

Must wait, while here Suso's
Hand hones his tacks and needles,
Scourging to sores his own red sluices
For the relish of heaven, relentless, dousing with prickles
Of horsehair and lice his horny loins;

While there irate Cyrus
Squanders a summer and the brawn of his heroes
To rebuke the horse-swallowing River Gyndes
He split it into three hundred and sixty trickles
A girl could wade without wetting her shins.

Still, latter-day sages,
Smiling at this behavior, subjugating their enemies
Neatly, nicely, by disbelief or bridges,
Never grip, as their grandsires did, that devil who chuckles
From grain of the marrow and the river-bed grains.

ELECTRA ON AZALEA PATH

The day you died I went into the dirt,
 Into the lightless hibernaculum
 Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
 Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard.
 It was good for twenty years, that wintering-
 As if you had never existed, as if I came
 God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly:
 Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.
 I had nothing to do with guilt or anything
 When I wormed back under my mother's heart.

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence
 I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.
 Nobody died or withered on that stage,
 Everything took place in a durable whiteness.
 The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill.
 I found your name, I found your bones and all
 Enlisted in a cramped necropolis,
 Your speckled stone askew by an iron fence.

In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead
 Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower
 Breaks the soil. This is Azalea Path.
 A field of burdock opens to the south.
 Six feet of yellow gravel cover you.
 The artificial red sage does not stir
 In the basket of plastic evergreens they put
 At the headstone next to yours, nor does it rot,
 Although the rains dissolve a bloody dye:
 The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.

Another kind of redness bothers me:
 The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath
 The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth
 My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.
 I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.
 The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry
 A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;
 My mother dreamed you face down in the sea.

The stony actors poise and pause for breath.
 I brought my love to bear, and then you died.
 It was the gangrene ate you to the bone
 My mother said: you died like any man.
 How shall I age into that state of mind?
 I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
 My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
 O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
 Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
 It was my love that did us both to death.

PURDAH

Jade-
 Stone of the side,
 The agonized

Side of a green Adam, I
 Smile, cross-legged,
 Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.
 So valuable!
 How the sun polishes this shoulder!

And should
 The moon, my
 Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
 Dragging trees-
 Little bushy polyps,

Little nets,
 My visibilities hide.
 I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives.
 Lord of the mirrors!
 It is himself he guides

In among these silk
 Screens, these rustling appurtenances.
 I breathe, and the mouth

Veil stirs its curtain.
 My eye
 Veil is

A concatenation of rainbows.
 I am his.
 Even in his

Absence, I
 Revolve in my
 Sheath of impossibles,

Priceless and quiet
 Among these parakeets, macaws!
 O chatterers

Attendants of the eyelash!
I shall unloose
One feather, like the peacock.

Attendants of the lip!
I shall unloose
One note

Shattering
The chandelier
Of air that all day plies

Its crystals,
A million ignorants.
Attendants!

Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose

I shall unloose-
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart-

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.

CANDLES

They are the last romantics, these candles:
 Upside down hearts of light tipping wax fingers,
 And the fingers, taken in by their own haloes,
 Grown milky, almost clear, like the bodies of saints.
 It is touching, the way they'll ignore

A whole family of prominent objects
 Simply to plumb the deeps of an eye
 In its hollow of shadows, its fringe of reeds,
 And the owner past thirty, no beauty at all.
 Daylight would be more judicious,

Giving everybody a fair hearing.
 They should have gone out with balloon flights
 and the stereopticon.
 This is no time for the private point of view.
 When I light them, my nostrils prickle.
 Their pale, tentative yellows

Drag up false, Edwardian sentiments,
 And I remember my maternal grandmother from Vienna.
 As a schoolgirl she gave roses to Franz Josef.
 The burghers sweated and wept. The children wore white.
 And my grandfather moped in the Tyrol,

Imagining himself a headwaiter in America,
 Floating in a high-church hush
 Among ice buckets, frosty napkins.
 These little globes of light are sweet as pears.
 Kindly with invalids and mawkish women,

They mollify the bald moon.
 Nun-souled, they burn heavenward and never marry.
 The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open.
 In twenty years I shall be retrograde
 As these drafty ephemerids.

I watch their spilt tears cloud and dull to pearls.
 How shall I tell anything at all
 To this infant still in a birth-drowse?
 Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her,
 The shadows stoop over like guests at a christening.

MAGI

The abstracts hover like dull angels:
 Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye
 Bossing the ethereal blanks of their face-ovals.

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
 Snow, chalk or suchlike. They're
 The real thing, all right: the Good, the True -

Salutary and pure as boiled water,
 Loveless as the multiplication table.
 While the child smiles into thin air.

Six months in the world, and she is able
 To rock on all fours like a padded hammock.
 For her, the heavy notion of Evil

Attending her cot is less than a belly ache,
 And Love the mother of milk, no theory.
 They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

They want the crib of some lamp-headed
 Plato.
 Let them astound his heart with their merit.
 What girl ever flourished in such company?

FOR A FATHERLESS SON

You will be aware of an absence, presently,
Growing beside you, like a tree,
A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree-
Balding, gelded by lightning - an illusion,
And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of attention.

But right now you are dumb.
And I love your stupidity,
The blind mirror of it. I look in
And find no face but my own, and you think that's funny.
It is good for me

To have you grab my nose, a ladder rung.
One day you may touch what's wrong
And I see you see
The small skulls, the smashed blue hills, the godawful hush.
Till then your smiles are found money.

PRIVATE GROUND

First frost, and I walk among the rose-fruit, the marble toes
Of the Greek beauties you brought
Off Europe's relic heap
To sweeten your neck of the New York woods.
Soon each white lady will be boarded up
Against the cracking climate.

All morning, with smoking breath, the handyman
Has been draining the goldfish ponds.
They collapse like lungs, the escaped water
Threading back, filament by filament, to the pure
Platonic table where it lives. The baby carp
Litter the mud like orangepeel.

Eleven weeks, and I know your estate so well
I need hardly go out at all.
A superhighway seals me off.
Trading their poisons, the north and south bound cars
Flatten the doped snakes to ribbon. In here, the grasses
Unload their griefs on my shoes,

The woods creak and ache, and the day forgets itself.
I bend over this drained basin where the small fish
Flex as the mud freezes.
They glitter like eyes, and I collect them all.
Morgue of old logs and old images, the lake
Opens and shuts, accepting them among its reflections.

I AM VERTICAL

But I would rather be horizontal.
I am not a tree with my root in the soil
Sucking up minerals and motherly love
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
Nor am I the beauty of the garden bed
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.
Compared with me, a tree is immortal
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,
And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.

Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,
The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors.
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.
Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping
I must most perfectly resemble them -
Thoughts gone dim.
It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers
 have time for me.

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

The horizons ring me like faggots,
 Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.
 Touched by a match, they might warm me,
 And their fine lines singe
 The air to orange
 Before the distances they pin evaporate,
 Weighting the pale sky with a solider color.
 But they only dissolve and dissolve
 Like a series of promises, as I step forward.

There is no life higher than the grasstops
 Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind
 Pours by like destiny, bending
 Everything in one direction.
 I can feel it trying
 To funnel my heat away.
 If I pay the roots of the heather
 Too close attention, they will invite me
 To whiten my bones among them.

The sheep know where they are,
 Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds,
 Grey as the weather.
 The black slots of their pupils take me in.
 It is like being mailed into space,
 A thin, silly message.
 They stand about in grandmotherly disguise,
 All wig curls and yellow teeth
 And hard, marbly baas.

I come to wheel ruts, and water
 Limpid as the solitudes
 That flee through my fingers.
 Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;
 Lintel and sill have unhinged themselves.
 Of people the air only
 Remembers a few odd syllables.
 It rehearses them moaningly:
 Black stone, black stone.

They sky leans one me, me, the one upright
 Among all horizontals.
 The grass is beating its head distractedly.
 It is too delicate
 For a life in such company;
 Darkness terrifies it.
 Now, in valleys narrow
 And black as purses, the houselights
 Gleam like small change.

MYSTIC

The air is a mill of hooks -
 Questions without answer,
 Glittering and drunk as flies
 Whose kisses sting unbearably
 In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

I remember
 The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,
 The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.
 Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
 Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over -
 Not a toe, not a finger - and used,
 Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
 That lengthen from ancient cathedrals,
 What is the remedy?

The pill of the Communion tablet,
 The walking beside still water? Memory?
 Or picking up the bright pieces
 Of Christ in the faces of rodents,
 The tame flower-nibblers, the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable -
 The humpback in her small, washed cottage
 Under the spokes of the clematis?
 Is there no great love, only tenderness?
 Does the sea

Remember the walker upon it?
 Meaning leaks from the molecules.
 The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,
 The children leap in their cots.
 The sun blooms, it is a geranium.

The heart has not stopped.

THE SWARM

Somebody is shooting at something in our town -
 A dull pom, pom in the Sunday street.
 Jealousy can open the blood,
 It can make black roses.
 Who are they shooting at?

It is you the knives are out for
 At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon,
 The hump of Elba on your short back,
 And the snow, marshalling its brilliant cutlery
 Mass after mass, saying Shh!

Shh! These are chess people you play with,
 Still figures of ivory.
 The mud squirms with throats,
 Stepping stones for French bootsoles.
 The gilt and pink domes of Russia melt and float off

In the furnace of greed. Clouds, clouds.
 So the swarm balls and deserts
 Seventy feet up, in a black pine tree.
 It must be shot down. Pom! Pom!
 So dumb it thinks bullets are thunder.

It thinks they are the voice of God
 Condoning the beak, the claw, the grin of the dog
 Yellow-haunched, a pack dog,
 Grinning over its bone of ivory
 Like the pack, the pack, like everybody.

The bees have got so far. Seventy feet high!
 Russia, Poland and Germany!
 The mild hills, the same old magenta
 Fields shrunk to a penny
 Spun into a river, the river crossed.

The bees argue, in their black ball,
 A flying hedgehog, all prickles.
 The man with grey hands stands under the honeycomb
 Of their dream, the hived station
 Where trains, faithful to their steel arcs,

Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country.
 Pom, pom! They fall
 Dismembered, to a tod of ivy.
 So much for the chariots, the outriders, the Grand Army!
 A red tatter, Napoleon!

The last badge of victory.
 The swarm is knocked into a cocked straw hat.
 Elba, Elba, bleb on the sea!
 The white busts of marshals, admirals, generals
 Worming themselves into niches.

How instructive this is!
 The dumb, banded bodies
 Walking the plank draped with Mother France's upholstery
 Into a new mausoleum,
 An ivory palace, a crotch pine.

The man with grey hands smiles -
 The smile of a man of business, intensely practical.
 They are not hands at all
 But asbestos receptacles.
 Pom, pom! "They would have killed me."

Stings big as drawing pins!
 It seems bees have a notion of honour,
 A black, intractable mind.
 Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything.
 O Europe! O ton of honey!

CHILDLESS WOMAN

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.

My landscape is a hand with no lines,
The roads bunched to a knot,
The knot myself,

Myself the rose you achieve -
This body,
This ivory

Ungodly as a child's shriek.
Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,
Loyal to my image,

Uttering nothing but blood -
Taste it, dark red!
And my forest

My funeral,
And this hill and this
Gleaming with the mouths of corpses.

THE FEARFUL

This man makes a pseudonym
And crawls behind it like a worm.

This woman on the telephone
Says she is a man, not a woman.

The mask increases, eats the worm,
Stripes for mouth and eyes and nose,

The voice of the woman hollows -
More and more like a dead one,

Worms in the glottal stops.
She hates

The thought of a baby -
Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty -

She would rather be dead than fat,
Dead and perfect, like Nefertit,

Hearing the fierce mask magnify
The silver limbo of each eye

Where the child can never swim,
Where there is only him, and him.

THALIDOMIDE

O half moon -

Half-brain, luminosity -
Negro, masked like a white,

Your dark
Amputations crawl and appal -

Spidery, unsafe
What glove

What leatheriness
Has protected

Me from that shadow -
The indelible buds,

Knuckles at shoulder-blades, the
Faces that

Shove into being, dragging
The lopped

Blood-caul of absences.
All night I carpenter

A space for the thing I am given,
A love

Of two wet eyes and a screech.
White spit

Of indifference!
The dark fruits revolve and fall.

The glass cracks across,
The image

Flees and aborts like dropped mercury.

MARY'S SONG

The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat,
The fat
Sacrifices its opacity -

A window, holy gold.
The fire makes it precious,
The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,
Ousting the Jews.
Their thick palls float

Over scoured Poland, burnt-out
Germany
They do not die.

Grey birds obsess my heart,
Mouth-ash, ash of eye,
They settle. On the high

Precipice
That emptied one man into space
The ovens glowed like heaven, incandescent.

It is a heart,
This holocaust I walk in,
O golden child the world will kill and eat.

FACE LIFT

You bring me good news from the clinic,
 Whipping off your silk scarf, exhibiting the tight white
 Mummy-cloths, smiling: I'm all right.
 When I was nine, a lime-green anesthetist
 Fed me banana gas through a frog-mask. The nauseous vault
 Boomed with bad dreams and the Jovian voices of surgeons.
 Then mother swam up, holding a tin basin.
 O I was sick.

They've changed all that. Traveling
 Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift,
 Fizzy with sedatives and unusually humorous,
 I roll to an anteroom where a kind man
 Fists my fingers for me. He makes me feel something precious
 Is leaking from the finger-vents. At the count of two
 Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard . . .
 I don't know a thing.

For five days I lie in secret,
 Tapped like a cask, the years draining into my pillow.
 Even my best friend thinks I'm in the country.
 Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper.
 When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I'm twenty,
 Broody and in long skirts on my first husband's sofa, my fin-
 Buried in the lambswool of the dead poodle; /gers
 I hadn't a cat yet.

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady
 I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror -
 Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.
 They've trapped her in some laboratory jar.
 Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty /years,
 Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair.
 Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,
 Pink and smooth as a baby.

IN PLASTER

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
 This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
 And the white person is certainly the superior one.
 She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.
 At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality -
 She lay in bed with me like a dead body
 And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was

Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.
 I couldn't sleep for a week, she was so cold.
 I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer.
 I couldn't understand her stupid behaviour!
 When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist.
 Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her:
 She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages.

Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful.
 I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose
 Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,
 And it was I who attracted everybody's attention,
 Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed.
 I patronized her a little, and she lapped it up -
 You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality.

I didn't mind her waiting on me, and she adored it.
 In the morning she woke me early, reflecting the sun
 From her amazingly white torso, and I couldn't help but notice
 Her tidiness and her calmness and her patience:
 She humoured my weakness like the best of nurses,
 Holding my bones in place so they would mend properly.
 In time our relationship grew more intense.

She stopped fitting me closely and seemed offish.
 I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself,
 As if my habits offended her in some way.
 She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded.
 And my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces
 Simply because she looked after me so badly.
 Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.

She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,
 And I'd been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful -
 Wasting her days waiting on a half-corpse!
 And secretly she began to hope I'd die.
 Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,
 And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case
 Wears the face of a Pharaoh, though it's made of mud and
 /water.

I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp -
I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,
So I was careful not to upset her in any way
Or brag ahead of time how I'd avange myself.
Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully.

I used to think we might make a go of it together -
After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.
I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,
And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.

EAVESDROPPER

Your brother will trim my hedges!
 They darken your house,
 Nosey grower,
 Mole on my shoulder,
 To be scratched absently,
 To bleed, if it comes to that.
 The stain of the tropics
 Still urinous on you, a sin,
 A kind of bush-stink.

You may be local,
 But that yellow!
 Godawful!
 Your body one
 Long nicotine-finger
 On which I,
 White cigarette,
 Burn, for your inhalation,
 Driving the dull cells wild.

Let me roost in you!
 My distractions, my pallors.
 Let them start the queer alchemy
 That melts the skin
 Grey tallow, from bone and bone.
 So I saw your much sicker
 Predecessor wrapped up,
 A six and a half foot wedding cake.
 And he was not even malicious.

Do not think I don't notice your
 curtain -
 Midnight, four o'clock,
 Lit (you are reading),
 Tarting with the drafts that pass,
 Little whore tongue,
 Chenille beckoner,
 Beckoning my words in -
 The zoo yowl, the mad soft
 Mirror talk you love to catch me at.

How you jumped when I jumped on you
 Arms folded, ear cocked,
 Toad-yellow under the drop
 That would not, would not drop
 In a desert of cow people
 Trundling their udders home
 To the electric milker, the wifey,
 the big blue eye

That watches, like God, or the sky
The ciphers that watch it.

O yellow
Weasel unable
To rearrange the bitchy starvation,
the dust lust!
I had you hooked.
I called. You crawled out,
A weather figure, boggling,
Chink-yellow, Belge troll,
The Low Church smile
Spreading itself, bad butter.

This is what I am in for!
Your bone plates,
Your creaky biscuits,
Sweater sets and treachery!
Come to tea! Come to tea!
I shall stuff you with pillows!
Pillow after pillow of pure silence.
Flea body!
Eyes like mice

Flicking over my property,
Levering letter flaps,
Scrutinizing the fly
Of the man's pants
Dead on the chair back,
Opening the fat smiles, the eyes
Of two babies
Just to make sure -
Toad-stone! Sister bitch! Sweet
neighbor!

THE OTHER

You come in late, wiping your lips.
What did I leave untouched on the doorstep -

White Nike,
Streaming between my walls?

Smilingly, blue lightning
Assumes, like a meathook, the burden of his parts.

The police love you, you confess everything.
Bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic,

Is my life so intriguing?
Is it for this you widen your eye-rings?

Is it for this the air motes depart?
They are not air motes, they are corpuscles.

Open your handbag. What is the bad smell?
It is your knitting, busily

Hooking itself to itself,
It is your sticky candies.

I have your head on my wall.
Navel cords, blue-red and lucent,

Shriek from my belly like arrows, and these I ride.
O moon-glow, o sick one,

The stolen horses, the fornications
Circle a womb or marble.

Where are you going
That you suck breath like mileage?

Sulphurous adulteries grieve in a dream.
Cold glass, how you insert yourself

Between myself and myself!
I scratch like a cat.

The blood that runs is dark fruit -
An effect, a cosmetic.

You smile.
No, it is not fatal.

THE JAILOR

My night sweats grease his breakfast plate.
 The same placard of blue fog is wheeled into
 position
 With the same trees and headstones.
 Is that all he can come up with,
 The rattler of keys?

I have been drugged and raped.
 Seven hours knocked out of my right mind
 Into a black sack
 Where I relax, foetus or cat,
 Lever of his wet dreams.

Something is gone.
 My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin,
 Drops me from a terrible altitude.
 Carapace smashed,
 I spread to the beaks of birds.

O little gimlets!
 What holes this papery day is already full of!
 He has been burning me with cigarettes,
 Pretending I am a Negress with pink paws.
 I am myself. That is not enough.

The fever trickles and stiffens in my hair.
 My ribs show. What have I eaten?
 Lies and smiles.
 Surely the sky is not that colour,
 Surely the grass should be rippling.

All day, gluing my church of burnt matchsticks,
 I dream of someone else entirely.
 And he, for this subversion,
 Hurts me, he
 With his armoury of fakery.

His high, cold masks of amnesia.
 How did I get here?
 Indeterminate criminal,
 I die with variety -
 Hung, starved, burned, hooked!

I imagine him
 Impotent as distant thunder,
 In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.
 I wish him dead or away.
 That, it seems is the impossibility,

That being free. What would the dark
Do without fevers to eat?
What would the light
Do without eyes to knife, what would he
Do, do, do without me?

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